

## Lights, Sound, Screwdriver! by urdearestmom

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**Summary:** Mike Wheeler was a little afraid of Jane Hopper, but that was only really because Dustin didn't know where to stop when discussing rumours. OR She stabbed a kid with a screwdriver and feels exactly zero remorse.

## 1. The Meeting

this is inspired by a tumblr post by user the90swerentreal  
someone reblogged and said "imagine ur otp" so i did and this is what  
came of it

i actually really like this, and i hope you guys do too!

---

Mike was sitting in the office waiting to meet with the vice principal. He had been sitting there for ten minutes after he'd been called out of class, and he was getting antsy because he didn't want to be missing so many notes in physics. Why the hell did they call him out of class if they were just going to make him sit and wait? He could've been doing something productive, but no, he had to sit there and wait for the VP who called him to the office and then didn't talk to him. Weren't school authorities supposed to make sure students were in class?

His thoughts were interrupted by the abrupt entrance of someone else. Looking up, he saw that it was Jane Hopper. She'd been adopted by the chief and started school with everyone else back in eighth grade, but Mike had never spoken to her personally in the three years she'd been in town. She was a quiet girl, almost always passing unnoticed. She always sat next to the windows in classrooms and didn't really participate much, only when she was called on.

He remembered when she first started school, and the rumours that she'd killed her own parents and that's why she had been adopted. He'd been a little scared, but because he was an observer more than anything else, Mike had watched her from afar. Jane didn't seem like she was capable of killing anyone... but Dustin's propensity to believe rumours and make conjectures about people he didn't know had caused Mike to stay away from her. In the classes he'd had with her over the last few years, he'd just watched and learned about her what he could from seeing her (and not that he would ever admit it to anyone, but he thought she was really pretty and looking at her kind of made his heart go all funny).

Jane sank into the seat next to him, looking around the office quickly

before turning to him. "So what are you in for?" She asked.

He glanced behind him, she had to be talking to someone else, but there was no one besides them and the secretary currently in the room. "M-me?"

Jane furrowed her brows. "Yes, you. Who else would I be talking to?"

Mike swallowed. "I- I don't know. Sorry. Um, they just want to know if it's cool if I miss my classes tomorrow to run sound and lights for a presentation in the auditorium."

She nodded. "Cool."

"What are you in for?"

Jane looked at her scuffed Converse. "I stabbed a kid with a screwdriver."

*WELL.* "We lead very different lives, then."

She hummed noncommittally. "That we do."

"I'm sure he deserved it. What'd he do?"

"Existed, in front of me."

He almost laughed, but then he remembered Dustin's loud arguments against talking to her. If she stabbed a kid with a screwdriver just for existing...

Jane must have noticed the look on his face. "I'm kidding! He was being a dick. Troy Harrington, you know him?"

Mike inhaled sharply. "You bet. Biggest asshole this side of Indiana."

"Well, he was trying, once again, to ask my friend Max on a date. She's told him no about a thousand times, honestly, when will he get the point? So, I stabbed him and he went crying to Kowalski like the little baby that he is."

This time Mike snorted. "Sounds like he did deserve it, after all."

Why'd you have a screwdriver?"

She looked him straight in the eyes. "To stab people who deserve it."

"Half this school is screwed, then," he sighed, hoping she would get the terrible pun he'd just made.

Jane stared at him for a second, then started giggling, and it was the cutest sound Mike had ever heard. "Oh my god, did you *really* just make that joke?"

*Shit.* "Sorry, was it lame?"

"A little. But it was cute." She paused. "You're cute."

Mike could almost feel his face change colour, and he hoped he wasn't turning *too* red under Jane's scrutiny. "I am?" He squeaked.

She nodded. "I've always thought you were cute. Max thinks I'm insane, but I guess it's good 'cause that means I have less competition."

He felt like he was going to faint. Did this mean he hadn't been the only one? She'd been watching him too? "You what?"

Mike didn't get to hear her answer, because just then the VP came out of his office. "Michael?"

When Mike came back out, Jane was gone, but when he got to his locker before lunch, he noticed there was a piece of paper stuck to the door. It had what appeared to be a phone number on it, and underneath was written:

*Call me. Be prepared, you might get my dad instead haha*

*xoxo JH*

---

lemme know if i should continue this :)

also do not fret, there is an update of a is for alphabet coming soon, i just went to ottawa for five days and didn't have my laptop so that

got delayed

## 2. The Meeting (But With El)

oh look another chapter? except it's not a continuation, it's the same scene but from el's POV

it also has the wonderful stabbing scene :)

---

Max and El had simply been minding their own business in study hall when in front of them who should appear but Troy Harrington.

"Hey, Mayfield, you free this Saturday?"

Max groaned and slammed her head down on her history textbook. "Why, Harrington?"

He smirked. "It's time for that date, baby."

Max buried her head further into the pages. "I've told you no a million times, can you just fuck off already?"

Troy came closer. "I could fuck you, instead," he leered. That was El's breaking point. She had been fingering the screwdriver in her pocket ever since she'd seen Troy enter the library, just knowing he was going to come bother them.

"Or you could fuck off instead, just like Max said," she answered, standing to her full height and holding her arms out threateningly.

Troy scoffed at her. "Or what?"

El whipped the screwdriver from her pocket and in an instant Troy was bent over clutching his stomach, wheezing. "Or that. Your choice." She sat back down and put the tool away.

Troy looked up at her with something akin to terror in his eyes. "You crazy bitch! She stabbed me! You freak! She stabbed me!" He cried. Mr. Kowalski, the librarian, came over to shush them.

"Mr. Harrington, what is going on? You need to be quiet!"

"She stabbed me! With a screwdriver!" He motioned to El. Max had yet to remove her face from her textbook.

Mr. Kowalski looked over his glasses at the girl. "Is this true, Miss Hopper?"

She shrugged. "He deserved it," she answered defiantly.

The old man's face darkened. "Go to the office. Now."

"I'll be back later," El said, patting Max's shoulder. Max nodded, head still down.

"Miss Hopper!"

She held her hands up. "I'm going! Geez, get your panties out of that knot, will ya?"

She could hear him grumbling about kids and their disrespect for authority all the way to the door. *Maybe you should pay more attention to these stupid boys and their disrespect for women! Troy so deserved what he got.*

Upon entering the office, El saw that other than the secretary, there was one other person there, and it was Mike Wheeler. She knew him from classes they'd shared and from the one time Hopper had brought a crying little blonde girl into the station and Mike had come flying inside in a panic, looking for his sister.

Ever since the first day of eighth grade, El had thought he was cute. She had seen him in the hall at the start of the day and she recognized him in her homeroom and third period class by his sweater (it was kind of hideous, but he somehow made it work). Over the years, they had had several classes together, and he was a student that was very engaged in the classes he liked, so she got to hear him speak a lot. He was enthusiastic and compelling, able to make even the most boring topic sound interesting. She could have listened to him talk for hours; she liked his voice that much. And sometimes she caught him watching her, and when she did he would look away as if he'd been burned (it made her feel fuzzy).

Of course, Max only knew that El thought he was cute and had

somewhat of a crush on him. If Max knew the whole extent of El's feelings about this Mike, she would never let up on the teasing. El had already made that mistake with Hopper because she was very blunt and told things as they were, so when he asked her about school she had told him all about this kid she was so interested in, and after that he would randomly ask for updates on the situation. El would always duck her head in embarrassment and mumble about how he would never like a girl like her.

She was an outcast, she supposed. She liked to wear black and all her jeans were ripped, and she carried around weapons of varying bluntness to stab deserving people. Her only real friend was Max, who no one really liked either because she didn't try to fit in with most of the other girls in their grade. She was a skateboarder who liked the arcade and forest adventures.

Hopper would always try to cheer her up when she got like that, reminding her that she was wonderful the way she was, and if a boy couldn't see that then he wasn't worth it.

Either way, El was now confronted with two options: ignore him, or take the opportunity presented and finally talk to him. *Suck it up, Hopper*, she thought, before taking the seat next to him and speaking.

"So what are you in for?" She asked, trying to sound nonchalant. *Be confident!* She felt like her stomach was about to erupt with nervousness.

Mike looked at her and then looked behind him, as if she was talking to someone else. "M-me?"

"Yes, you, who else would I be talking to?" *Shit, was that too forceful?*

He looked like he was a little scared by her, which she could understand but which also made her a little sad. Was she really that intimidating? "I-I don't know. Um, they just want to know if it's cool if I miss my classes tomorrow to run sound and lights for a presentation in the auditorium." Ah yes, sound and lights. El also knew that he was president of their school's AV club.

She nodded, of course he wouldn't have gotten in trouble for



anything. He was a model student. "Cool."

"What are you in for?" She didn't know how to answer, because she didn't want to scare him off or something, but she also didn't like lying.

"I stabbed a kid with a screwdriver."

His eyes widened. "We lead very different lives, then."

*Shit, I just blew it.* "That we do."

"Well I'm sure he deserved it. What'd he do?" Wait a minute, he was actually agreeing with her? It seemed he wasn't weirded out by her slight violent tendencies after all.

"Existed, in front of me," she said sarcastically. *Okay, now he looks scared.* "I'm kidding! He was being a dick. Troy Harrington, you know him?"

Mike inhaled. "You bet. Biggest asshole this side of Indiana."

El almost laughed. Good, she and Max weren't the only ones with that opinion of Troy. "Well, he was trying, once again, to ask my friend Max on a date. She's told him no about a thousand times, honestly, when will he get the point? So, I stabbed him and he went crying to Kowalski like the little baby that he is."

Mike snorted and she felt a sense of pride at him having found her story amusing. She suddenly felt very comfortable. She wasn't afraid of him being scared of her now that he had almost laughed.

"Sounds like he did deserve it, after all. Why'd you have a screwdriver?"

El looked him directly in the eyes, which was hard but worth it because his eyes were so *pretty*. It also added to the drama of her next statement. "To stab people who deserve it."

"Half this school is screwed, then," he sighed, slumping down a little bit and glancing at her as if to gauge her reaction to what he'd said.

*Did he just- AAAAAAAAAA HE TOLD ME A JOKE!* She started giggling. "Did you really just make that joke?"

"Sorry, was it lame?" Now he looked disappointed, as if his joke hadn't worked.

"A little. But it was cute." Now or never, Ellie. "You're cute." She steeled herself for a weird look or a swift rejection, but instead Mike just started blushing violently.

"I am?" *How is he unaware of his own cuteness?*

She nodded, now trying to appear confident and suave but really trying not to squeal because he was BLUSHING at her compliment. "I've always thought you were cute. Max thinks I'm insane, but I guess it's good 'cause that means I have less competition."

"You what?" He asked faintly. *Shit, was that too far? Oh god, why am I like this.*

El was saved from having to answer by the vice principal coming out of his office and calling Mike. A few minutes after, the principal called her into his office, gave her the usual stern look, then told her she had detention after school and let her go.

She was sad that Mike wasn't out yet, but also giddy that she had finally managed to talk to him and she didn't think it had gone too badly. On her way back to study hall, she stopped at Mike's locker, suddenly having an idea and another burst of confidence. She was having a lot of those today, wasn't she?

On a piece of ripped out notebook paper, she scrawled her house number and under it she wrote:

*Call me. Be prepared, you might get my dad haha*

*xoxo JH*

El almost wrote EH as her initials, but then she remembered that Mike didn't know her nickname was El or that she went by it, he probably only knew her as Jane.

She could only hope that he had liked Jane enough to call her.

### 3. The Phone Call

Sitting down at their table in the cafeteria, Mike looked around the large room to see if he could spot Jane. He thought he might have seen a flash of red hair that could've been Max Mayfield, but it disappeared as quickly as he'd found it.

"Why do you have that stupid smile on your face?" Asked Dustin immediately.

Mike ignored him as he opened his lunchbox, continuing to smile down at the table.

"Dude."

Lucas appeared suddenly, glancing between his two friends before settling beside Dustin. "What's up?"

"Mike's smiling like an idiot and it's creeping me out."

Said boy snorted. "Calm down, Dustin, I'm waiting for Will so I can tell you guys all at once," he said.

"Tell us what?" Came a voice from Mike's left. It was Will, arriving right on time.

Mike smirked into his lunch. "I just got a girl's number." At the thought of talking to her again, the sappy smile overtook his face once more.

"No way!"

"What the fuck?"

"False. That is false. False! You lie!"

Mike felt affronted. "What, you didn't think I could? Some friends I have," he muttered.

Will patted his elbow. "No, it's just... unexpected. What with our reputation in this school, it's not like there's girls lining up to talk to

us, exactly."

"Yeah, they kind of avoid looking at us, Mike," added Lucas, shaking his head. Dustin's mouth was hanging open.

With a dark look at his friends, Mike reached into his pocket and drew out the note, throwing it on the table. "Believe me now?" He shoved a forkful of casserole in his mouth, chewing forcefully.

Dustin snatched it up. "Who the hell's JH?" He looked at Lucas and Will. "Guys?"

"Julie Hall?" Supplied Lucas. Mike shook his head. "Jessica Heath?" Nope.

"It's definitely not Jennifer Hayes," added Will.

Mike snorted. "Hayes is nice but she wouldn't stoop *that* low."

"Jillian Hackett?" Asked Dustin.

"It's not any of the girls you just said and I'm not telling."

Suddenly a thought occurred to Dustin. "It's not Jane Hopper, is it? Oh my god, Mike, she's gonna lure you to a warehouse or something and then hold you hostage and kill you!"

"She's not gonna kill me! You shouldn't believe rumours, and anyway it's been like three years and she's never done anything, you should drop it," Mike huffed.

Dustin crowed triumphantly. "So it is her!"

"I said I'm not telling!"

"You basically just admitted it!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Guys!" Exclaimed Will. "Don't fight, please."

Lucas was ignoring them in favour of his lunch as Will calmed the other two. "If it is her, I don't think she's gonna kill him, Dustin. Mike can fend for himself. And he'll tell us when he's ready, so drop it."

"Thanks, Will."

The boys finished their lunches in silence, Mike stewing over what Dustin had said. Jane wasn't gonna hurt him! She was nice! Sure, she'd stabbed someone with a screwdriver, but that someone had been Troy and he definitely deserved it (in Mike's opinion, Troy deserved a lot of things and not one of them was pleasant). Mike didn't care what Dustin said anyway; he wanted to talk to her again.

---

"You did what?!"

El sighed and repeated herself. "I gave him my number."

Max spluttered. "Sorry, when was this?! I don't recall!"

They were walking home after El's detention, or rather, Max was skating and El was trying to keep up with her.

"I told you, when I was coming back from the office!"

Max huffed. "I'm offended that you waited all day to tell me."

El sighed again. "He's just really cute, okay? And today I actually talked to him and he was really nice! He even made a joke, Max, come on."

"What did he say?"

"I said I had a screwdriver so I could stab deserving people and he said that half the school is screwed."

Max snorted and shook her head, pushing forward. "What a dork, I *cannot* believe you actually like this guy."

El reddened. "Max!"

"El likes Mike! El likes Mike!" Max chanted, a grin splitting her face.

"Shut up, someone could hear!"

"There's no one around to see El and Mike sitting in a tree-"

"MAX!"

Walking in the door of the Hopper house a few minutes later, Max was still teasing. "So, what, are you just gonna sit around and wait for him to call?"

"I just wanna talk to him again, okay? Maybe we could all be friends, you know."

"Talk to who?"

El jumped. "Jesus, Dad, I didn't know you were home."

Hopper squinted at her, walking out from the kitchen. "The cruiser's out front, kid."

She went to the window, and indeed her adoptive father's police cruiser was parked in front of their house. "Didn't see it. And just a... friend. From school."

Max shuffled around on the carpet, looking like she wanted to interrupt.

Hopper nodded, but El could tell he wasn't done. He sat on the couch and turned the TV on before answering. "Make sure you don't talk to Mike for too long."

"Dad! Ugh, both of you?!" Exclaimed El as Max and Hopper both started laughing.

"So you know about him too?" Asked Max excitedly.

El stomped off to her room to get a start on her homework, leaving her stupid best friend and her stupid dad to their stupid conversation.

*God.*

---

After clearing his plate from dinner and helping clear the table, Mike rushed upstairs, darting covertly into Nancy's room to use her phone. She was away at college, and it would be easier to talk to Jane without his mom breathing over his neck.

He dialled the number with shaking fingers, hoping that it would be her that answered and not her dad. Mike didn't particularly feel like talking to Hawkins' chief of police at the moment.

On the third ring, someone picked up.

"Hopper residence, Jane speaking."

Mike breathed a sigh of relief. "Jane! Hi!"

"Oh, hi, Mike!"

"Um, how- how are you?" He asked.

"I've been better. I had detention for stabbing Troy."

"Was it worth it though?"

"Oh, absolutely," she said, without hesitation.

He laughed. "Of course it was. So, um, are you done that assignment for Worrall's class yet?"

She sighed, the line crackling. "Remind me when that's due again..."

They continued in this strain until a few minutes later when they were interrupted by Holly. Mike started when she suddenly walked into Nancy's room.

"Mikey, can you tell me a goodnight story?"

He looked at her for a second, not really wanting to hang up but also not really being able to say no to her. "Sorry Jane, my little sister wants me to tell her a bedtime story, I gotta go."

There was a pause. "It's El."

He furrowed his brows. "What?"



"My name, I don't go by Jane to people who know me. It's El. I just remembered you didn't know that."

"Oh. Okay. Well, El," he said, putting emphasis on the new name, "I gotta go now but-" He looked at the ceiling, contemplating his next words. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Sure!"

"You can come sit with us at lunch, if you want? Bring Max too."

"Uh, okay. I'll talk to her. Meet you at your locker?"

"Yeah!" *God, Wheeler, you sound so desperate.*

"Alright, guess I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Good night, El."

"Good night, Mike."

Putting the phone back in its cradle, Mike swung a long arm in front of him and snatched Holly up, making her giggle. "Time for bed, Miss Holly!"

She slapped him across the face. "It's *princess* Holly."

"Geez, okay, you didn't have to slap me, you little monster!"

"I'm a princess!" She protested.

Mike laughed. "Whatever you say, Hol."

## 4. The Lunch

lol so it's been a while, i wanted to finish my other stuff before starting this so that i can fully focus on it

i have a whole outline yay! it looks like it's gonna be about 17 chapters, but that might change depending on how things go when i'm writing it

i'm gonna be posting progress updates on my tumblr, urdearestmom, so if you wanna follow me there or just like,, pop in or w/e that'd be nice ;)

---

The next morning, Mike avoided his friends until lunch. He felt like, in his excitement, he might say something to give away who was going to be joining them, and Dustin would immediately freak out. He was probably going to freak out anyway when he saw Jane- *El* and Max with Mike, but he'd tone it down in front of them for fear of offending them.

And so it was that Mike was standing against his locker waiting, having just sent Lucas off to the cafeteria with the assurance that he would be there in a minute. Now, as he waited for the girls to show up, he was starting to feel nervous. What if they didn't show up at all? Or worse, what if they did, but then didn't like his friends? That would suck majorly, and he was used to people not liking him or his friends, but it would be worse because for some reason he *really* wanted El to like them.

(He knew perfectly well what the reason was, he just didn't want to admit it.)

A flash of red came streaking down the hall, and then in front of Mike stopped Max Mayfield. He didn't see El, but he thought he might as well say hi.

"Hey," he said, sticking his hand out. "I'm Mike."

She smirked. "Oh, trust me, I know who you are."

"What do you mean?" *That's confusing, why in the fuck would she know me?*

"Oh, you mean you don't know? El totally-" A hand appeared out of nowhere and plastered itself across Max's mouth.

"Shut *up!* Why is it your life's mission to embarrass me?!"

A smile stretched its way across Mike's face at the sound of her voice, but then he schooled it into a more neutral expression, hoping neither of the girls had noticed. El was glaring at Max, who was eyeing Mike with eyes full of mirth. *Shit.*

"Hi, Mike," said El, removing her hand from Max's mouth. "Ignore her, she's just a shit-disturber."

Max gasped. "I am not! You just don't want him to know that-"

El threw her hand across her friend's face again. "Let's get to lunch, yeah?" She said, nodding to Mike, who started walking in the direction of the cafeteria doors. "And you shut up," she added, taking her hand off again and pointing a warning finger at the other girl.

Max grinned. "I see," she said, wiggling her eyebrows.

El groaned exasperatedly. *I wonder what that's about,* thought Mike.

Walking into the caf with the two girls, Mike had expected to get more stares, seeing as he wasn't exactly the type of guy to usually have any girls around him, much less two. However, only a few people looked at them, and none with any particular interest.

That was until he spotted his friends, Will smirking into his lunch as if he'd just been proven right about something, Lucas staring at Max, and Dustin with his jaw hanging. Mike sent him a piercing glare, as if to say, *You better behave or I'll strangle you... or something.* That would've been an empty threat if he'd actually said it, because Dustin knew full well that if he had to, Mike would jump off a cliff for him.

"Hey guys, the girls are joining us for lunch today," he said, sitting down at his usual spot next to Will. "This is Will, Lucas, and Dustin," he added, gesturing to each one in turn. They waved.

"I'm Max," said Max, moving over by Lucas. "Didn't know you were friends with these guys, Sinclair."

"Yeah," said Lucas. "These are the idiots I tell you about all the time."

Dustin scoffed, avoiding everyone's gazes. "We are not idiots. And we didn't know he was friends with you either, Max."

El sat down and poked Mike in the side, for no reason other than wanting to see him squirm. "I'm Jane, but you probably all know that already."

Everyone was awkwardly silent for a moment, until Will said, "So you're the JH from Mike's note yesterday, then."

She nodded. "We met in the office 'cause I stabbed Harrington with a screwdriver. He was being a dick to Max," she added, noticing Dustin's slightly scared expression, which softened upon hearing this.

"So you gave him your number," deadpanned Lucas.

"Well yeah, I like him. He's nice," she said, looking at Mike with a smile. It made him feel like he could explode. "And funny, even if the joke was kind of lame."

"You said it was cute!" He protested.

"Because you got all embarrassed! So yeah, long story short, your friend is adorable and I wanted to talk to him again, so..."

The boys stared between El and Mike, and he could *feel* the amount of teasing he was gonna get later. He coughed awkwardly. "So, um, how'd you two meet?" He asked, nodding toward Max and Lucas while taking a bite of his sandwich.

---

Over the next three weeks, the girls joined them every day for lunch, hung out with them at the arcade, and on some days biked (or skated, in Max's case. *How does she do that?* Half the time, Mike couldn't even walk without tripping over his own feet) home with them. Max lived down Old Cherry Road, which wasn't too far from Mike and Lucas' houses, but closer to Dustin's, so they usually all

went in the same direction before splitting up if they weren't hanging at someone else's. El would sometimes stop by the station to talk to her dad, but most of the time she would just turn up Elm when they got to it and coast down the hill on her bike, pumping a fist in the air. She never said bye. It always left Mike with a goofy smile, which meant Lucas always gave him a lot of shit.

"If you love her so much why don't you marry her?"

Mike threw him a look. They were almost home, the last ones together being that they were next door neighbours. "What are you talking about?"

Lucas groaned. "Mike, seriously?"

"*What?*"

"You look at her all like, hi El, El, El-El, I love you so much! Would you marry me?!" Lucas said, in a high-pitched imitation of Mike that he didn't think sounded anything like him.

"Shut up, Lucas!" Mike could feel his face warming up, but he was *not* about to admit that he might have a crush on El Hopper, especially not to Lucas who would only tease him about it. "I don't like her."

"Uh, yeah, you do. You're not slick."

"Fine, well what about you and Max?"

Mike saw Lucas roll his eyes. "Yeah, she's pretty, and honestly, amazing. She's cool as fuck. But I don't like her like that. Not like you and your obvious ass crush on the chief's kid."

Mike was silent, considering what his friend had said. Was he really that obvious?

"Actually, on that. How do you think the chief's gonna take it?"

"Take what?"

"That his daughter has a boyfriend," clarified Lucas.

Alright, now he had to be absolutely red. *What the f-* "I'm not her boyfriend!" They were stopped in front of Lucas' house now, and Lucas was leaning his bike against the wall before going to stand on the front stoop.

Lucas shrugged. "But you want to be." He was opening the door now.

Mike spluttered. "What- I do *not*- it's not-"

"And you might as well be, anyway. The way she looks at you is different. She likes you, man."

"No, she doesn't!"

Lucas closed the door in his face, and Mike pedaled on to his house. *Motherfucking... what the - I literally can't even think straight right now. She doesn't like me. Does she? No, she can't.*

He'd thought that maybe she did, when they first met, because of some of the things she'd said. Like him being cute and adorable, and that Max thinking El was ridiculous left more chance for her. That implied that she liked him... right?

But then, over the past three weeks as the pair of girls became absorbed into the Party, El hadn't really done anything else of the sort. She was nice and friendly with him, as friends are, but he didn't see any difference in the way she treated him versus the way she treated the other boys.

What he did see (or rather felt) was that he now had a full-blown crush. Before, without ever having spoken to her, it was just a sort of... superficial attraction. She was interesting, she was pretty, and he wanted to know more about her. Now it was more like all he wanted to do was spend time with her, because she was still pretty and still interesting, and knowing what little he did of her made him want to know everything. He couldn't stop thinking about her.

He'd even once distractedly scribbled her name with his last name on a corner of the page while balancing some reactions in his chemistry homework, and it made him feel flustered just remembering it. He had erased it so aggressively that he'd ripped a hole in the paper.

There was no saving him now. *God help me, this girl's really got me.*

## 5. The Project

ok so i had a LOT of fun writing their banter in this chapter lol

hopper is an absolute shit-disturber, he and max are the ultimate mileven shippers

comment if you caught my vine reference ;)

there's some of el's tragic backstory in this, just know she's pretty much over it

also, the project is one i did in tenth grade for my history class except my group got the 80s and it was literally the best thing ever, i dressed up in rainbow colours did my nails with highlighters wore fingerless gloves and hoop earrings and even teased my hair which didn't work very well bc it's too flat lol

i also made a playlist for it and played a game with the class where they had to name the title artist or both and got points based on that it was fantastic

anyways, hope you enjoy!

(ps my tumblr is urdearestmom if you wanna follow for updates or just like,, talk to me or smth)

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"Alright, so now that we've established what this project will be about, I want you to get into groups of at least two, maximum four."

El looked to her right to see Mike already looking at her. He smiled when they made eye contact, then got up to join her at the empty desk beside her.

"Hey, so which decade do you wanna do?" He asked.

She cocked her head. "I don't know. I don't really care, to be honest."

He shrugged, setting his bag down on the floor and taking out a notebook. "I've kind of always liked the fifties, for some reason."



She laughed a little. "If you had a different haircut, maybe you could've been a greaser in another life. You look like the kind of guy that doesn't own a leather jacket, but if you did it would look insanely good." *Fuck, now I'm imagining it. That's hot... aaaaaand now he's blushing. What a cutie.*

Mike stammered over his words. "Uh, I don't- I don't know, if I would..." He cleared his throat. "Be able to, um, pull that off."

She winked. "I'd pull it off." *WHY AM I LIKE THIS?* Now the poor boy was as red as an actual tomato and the pair of girls behind them were giving them a weird look, El could see them out of the corner of her eye.

"Um, maybe we could do the seventies? A visit to childhood, if you will," he said, changing the subject.

"Sounds good."

"Great, let's tell her before someone else takes it."

The project was for their modern American history class, and they had about two and a half weeks to prepare a period-long presentation on a decade of their choosing, beginning with 1900-1909 and ending with 1970-1979. Technically, their teacher had said they could also do the eighties, but it would be kind of pointless since the decade wasn't over yet and wouldn't be on their final exam. The project was meant to help the class review major points of history by revisiting each decade.

Walking out together at the end of the period, Mike turned to El again. "So when do you want to get together?"

She choked. "What?"

"To work on the project?"

*Jesus.* She closed her eyes for a second, having taken his question in the complete opposite direction. "Uh, does today work? We can get started on an outline at least and my dad's gonna be out until dinnertime so we'll have the house empty, no distractions."

She chanced a quick glance in his direction only to see him smiling at the ground. It put a soft smile on her own face.

"Sounds good. Meet at the bike rack as usual, yeah?"

"Yeah. See you later!" She waved, pausing in the doorway of her math classroom to watch until Mike vanished around a corner on his way to English.

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"WOOOOOOOOOO!" She sped up Elm Street pumping a fist in the air as usual, but this time she was pedalling as fast as she could because Mike was following and they had to race, of course.

The pair had been trailing along at the back of their group, and had decided to race when they got to Elm. They'd started stupidly fast, if only partially to get away from their friends' whistling, but El had kept going fast and now her legs were burning. She could feel herself slowing down when suddenly Mike whizzed past her so fast all she saw was the blur of grey, blue, and yellow that was his shirt.

"LAST ONE THERE IS A ROTTEN EGG!" He yelled.

She was not about to let him win, it didn't matter how nice she wanted to be to him. "YEAH, WELL, FIRST ONE THERE IS GONNA LOSE THEIR SOUL!" She started pumping again, calves feeling like they were a thread away from ripping apart.

"I SOLD MINE TO SATAN LAST WEEK!" At that, she had to stop to laugh. Also, she was in front of her house, which meant she'd won anyway.

"Hey, dipshit, guess who's a rotten egg!"

Mike was almost at the next intersection, but it was close enough that she could see his utterly defeated expression from where she was standing. He turned around and slowly pedalled back, scowling the entire way. "Just when I thought I did something right," he grumbled, setting his bike down on the grass next to hers. "But hey, you lost your soul since you got here first."

She grinned. "Plot twist, I'm Satan."

"I *knew* it! I've been telling Will for weeks that there's something different about you!"

"I hope it's a good different," she remarked.

El saw him turn pink again. "Yeah, I- um. It's not bad. You're, like, the coolest person I've ever met."

She shoved the door open and stepped inside, spreading her arms out. "Welcome to the police chief's house. No drugs, no drinking, and certainly nothing else illegal!"

Mike stepped in after her, closing the door and taking in the surroundings. He didn't notice her until she was pressed right up against him with a finger under his chin. *What are you doing, El. Literally what are you doing.* She didn't really know, she just wanted to be close to him in that moment. "You better watch it, kid, or it'll be more than your soul you lose."

And then she was looking into his eyes, and he was staring back into hers with an intensity that made her feel like she was going to melt into a puddle right there on the floor. His gaze flicked down for a second, so hers did too, which was when she found herself staring at his lips. They looked so kissable in that moment, parted slightly and so pink and inviting. She wanted nothing more than to press hers against them, even for just a second, and they were so close all she had to do was push her face a little further up. It was something she'd definitely dreamed about before; laying up at night wondering what it would feel like, what it would taste like, to kiss Mike. She thought it might be nice. And it was so close...

He leaned his head back against the door, putting his face out of her reach. "Wow, that's threatening," he said.

She stepped back, avoiding looking at him. "Did you, uh, want something to eat?" She asked, taking off her shoes and walking into the kitchen. "I can successfully cook three things: scrambled eggs, bacon, and Eggos. Also you can take off your shoes, I'd rather not have to clean the floor later." *God, you dumbass. You gotta remember he doesn't like you!*

Mike joined her, looking around at the shelves while she rooted through the fridge. "You *really* like breakfast foods, huh?"

"Eggs, bacon, or Eggos, Mike?"

"Whatever you're having is fine."

"Eggos it is then," she answered, ripping four waffles out of the package and popping them into the toaster.

He came and leaned on the counter, observing her profile. "Actually," he said, "there's something I want to ask you." *Oh shit.*

"Shoot," she shrugged, turning to face him and copy his position.

"How do you like your eggs?"

El wrinkled her nose. "Why? Are you gonna make me breakfast any time soon?"

He rolled his eyes. "No, I just have a very specific way of eating my eggs and I wanted to know how you like yours."

She groaned. "God please no, don't tell me you're one of those people who thinks putting syrup on eggs is actually *acceptable*."

He looked affronted, putting a hand to his chest defensively. "It's delicious!"

"No, it's a deal breaker is what it is," she replied, putting the toasted Eggos on plates and passing one to Mike.

"But we're not even dating, how is it a deal breaker?" He said.

*Oh. Whoops. You're being forgetful again, Ellie.* "Fine, it would be a deal breaker if you asked me out."

He looked like he was thinking hard about something, but he was just chewing on a plain waffle. "Would you like that?" He asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Maybe." *Aaaaaaand there you go again, you idiot. Might as well have*

*asked him out yourself, you couldn't have been more obvious.*

Mike's face was bright pink again, but she had to give him credit for not stuttering like he usually did when embarrassed. "I'll keep that in mind."

They finished their Eggos in silence.

---

Over the course of the next few hours, they managed to come up with an outline for what they could talk about and how they'd present it, and decided to include a mixtape of well-known seventies songs. Most of the time was actually spent just goofing off or talking, though, and the two learned some things about each other.

El learned that Mike was pretty sure his parents were going to get a divorce soon, judging by the amount of times he'd had to take his little sister out somewhere in the middle of the afternoon or (if they were really unlucky) the middle of dinner, as of late. In return, she told him the truth about how she came to be adopted by Hopper and living in Hawkins, which was that she'd had a terrible stepfather back in the town she lived in before.

He had threatened both her and her mother a million times before actually doing something, which was poisoning her mother's cup. It put her in hospital and she died there within twenty-four hours. Hopper had been one of the cops investigating the case, the town's police force having been unable to take care of it and calling in back up from neighbouring towns, and because little Jane had been left without any family besides her aunt Becky (who couldn't take her), he had decided to adopt her.

"Jeez, El, I'm sorry. That's terrible." He was leaning against the wall as she hung upside down over the side of her bed.

She shrugged, or at least tried to, because it was hard to do when you were hanging upside down. "It's fine. She was never the best mom, and at least I'm rid of that asshole." This was her philosophy in life: you always have to look on the bright side of things, because if you only look on the dark side you're going to end up *becoming* the dark side.

"Still! You know Dustin actually used to be afraid of you because of the rumours when you got here?"

She laughed. "He's an idiot."

"Tell him that!"

The two had never been alone together for such a long amount of time, and so it was on this day that El discovered that she really, truly, deeply clicked with Mike. There was something so inherently familiar about him, about the way he spoke and moved and looked at her, that made her feel like she was home. Like he was her home. Which was weird and very uncharacteristic of her, she thought, because she didn't really consider herself a people person, and in retrospect they really hadn't known each other for that long. However, it was a nice feeling, so she let herself bask in it for a bit before she knew she had to start pushing it away. There was no way he'd ever like a girl like her.

---

"Hey, El, I'm home! What do you want for dinner?"

Shit, she'd completely lost track of time! From the looks of it, Mike had too. The two of them had spent the last hour sorting through hers and her dad's music collection searching for the perfect songs to put on their mixtape, and had been very enthusiastically dancing around her room to *September* when Hopper came in the door.

"Uh- hey, Dad!" El winced. She had forgotten to call the station when she got home to let him know that she had someone over. That was mostly because she'd only ever had Max over and Hopper didn't mind if she was there without him knowing since he basically considered her his second daughter, but also because she'd gotten so caught up in being able to spend time alone with the boy she'd liked for the past three years that it had completely slipped her mind.

She turned to Mike with a frantic expression. "Stay here and don't come out until I say so, I forgot to tell him you're here and he might freak out that I've had a boy in this house alone all afternoon," she whispered.

He was staring at her, looking scared. "Right, okay. I will be here pretending I don't exist," he whispered back, gulping.

Cursing under her breath, El walked out of her bedroom and to the front of the house to face Hopper. "Hey, Dad. How was your day?"

He was hanging up his coat and hat. "Was fine. Callahan's an idiot as usual, and Flo's still trying to convince me to stop smoking and eat healthy."

She shook her head ruefully. "Smoking gives you cancer and eating healthy is, coincidentally, good for your health."

Hopper shrugged, and she almost thought she'd gotten away with having Mike hidden in her room when her dad pointed near the door and said, "Whose shoes are those?"

*FUCK!* "Right, about that... I forgot to call and tell you."

He raised his eyebrows. "That doesn't answer the question. I know they're not Max's, they're way too big."

El sighed, defeated. "They're Mike's."

She chanced a quick look at Hopper to see his eyes had widened almost comically. "*The* Mike? The one you-"

"Shut up, he'll hear you!"

"What's he doing in my house, missy?"

She glanced down the hall in the direction of her room, seeing the door just the little bit ajar she'd left it. "We got assigned a project in history today and we're partners, so we came over here to work."

Hopper nodded sagely. "Of course. This project wouldn't have anything to do with anatomy, would it?"

"Dad!" El felt a flush of embarrassment creep up her face. "It's not like that at all. Plus I literally said it was history, stop trying to make bad jokes!"

He laughed. "You know I just like to tease, Ellie. Call him out," he said, gesturing to her door.

She swallowed. "Uh- you can come out now!"

The door creaked open and Mike's head popped out, the rest of him following when he saw that both father and daughter were staring at him.

Upon arriving in the kitchen, he stuck his hand out to shake Hopper's. "Nice to, um- nice to meet you, sir."

Hopper narrowed his eyes, squeezing the boy's hand. "I've heard a lot about you."

Mike laughed nervously. "All good things, I hope?"

Hopper didn't answer, simply staring as if he could see into the kid's soul, before turning to the fridge and taking some eggs out.

Mike turned to El, who was now freaking out. *Oh god, what if Dad scared him and he wants nothing to do with me anymore?*

"Was that good?" He mouthed.

She raised her hands in an 'I'm not sure, maybe?' gesture. She cleared her throat, trying to rid the room of the awkward silence that had taken over. "So, what's for dinner?"

Hopper was now looking like he was going to fry some eggs. "I figured I'd fry some eggs to make sandwiches and you guys can get a pizza if you want one," he replied. "You're staying, right, Wheeler? I'm sure your mother wouldn't mind."

El thought that sounded more like a thinly veiled threat than an invitation to stay for dinner, but she wasn't about to get in the way of the proceedings.

(Who was she kidding, she wanted him to stay too.)

"Uh, no, I just have to let her know. Is it okay if I use your phone?"



"Sure, kid."

As Mike went into the hall to call his mother, El sidled over to her dad. "So?" She asked.

"So, what?" Hopper answered.

"What do you think?"

He shrugged, cracking an egg into the hot pan. "Hasn't spoken enough to make a judge of his character, but he looks pretty harmless. I think I might actually like this kid."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "I told you he's a good kid."

"You did," he agreed, cracking another egg. "Set the table, and when he's done go order a pizza."

El wrapped her arms around him in a hug. "Thanks, Dad," she said, muffled into his shoulder.

He ruffled her hair. "Don't worry about it, kiddo."

---

Over dinner, Hopper made several comments that his daughter felt were *entirely unnecessary*. For example, did he really need to say that the reason he'd heard of Mike was that she hadn't been able to refrain from talking about him in the past three years?

Or that he was excited that they were finally getting to know each other?

Or that El was always overly thrilled whenever there were mentions of a hangout, because that meant she got to see Mike outside of school hours?

The boy had gotten redder with every word, until he looked very similar to the sauce on their pizza. By that point, she just wanted him to leave before her dad caused any more embarrassment.

And so it was that as soon as the pizza and egg sandwiches had been finished, El ran to her room and snatched all of Mike's stuff up before

handing it to him and shooing him out of the house. She finished with an "I'll see you Monday!" before closing the door and turning around to glare at Hopper.

"*Why* are you like this?" She seethed.

He didn't turn around. "Like what?"

"Like that! You just had to say all that stuff, didn't you? If he was ever going to like me before, he's definitely not going to after that!"

He shrugged, scrubbing a plate harshly to get the dried yolk off of it. "If he couldn't handle that then he shouldn't date you. But I think he handled it fine. And he likes you, you're just choosing not to see it. He's very obvious."

She scoffed. "Uh, no, he doesn't! He's not the type of guy to like girls like me, okay? We're just friends and that's all it's ever gonna be."

"I still don't see what's wrong with girls like you, Ellie. You're strong, and smart, and beautiful, what's there not to like?"

She sighed. *Dads are biased, he doesn't get it.* "I'm going to bed, Dad."

"It's early."

"I know, I just- want to go to bed. I'm tired."

He turned his head to look at her for a second before turning back to the dishes. "Alright, but if you need anything I'll be here watching Miami Vice."

"Thanks, Dad. Good night."

In her bed, wrapped up in the comforter, she was staring at the wall when she noticed a small notebook on the floor near her. It didn't look like hers, so she must have missed it when she was picking up Mike's stuff, or maybe it fell out of his bag when she'd shoved other stuff in.

She reached down to pick it up and saw that on the inside cover was indeed written *Michael Wheeler*. She knew she shouldn't read it, but

she was really curious. Besides, he didn't need to know she'd read it, right?

The first half or so of the notebook was filled with messy notes about weird fantastical creatures. She thought it might be him trying to plan a 'campaign' for that game he and the boys used to play, because she remembered that he said they hadn't played in a while and he wanted to make a big game for the summer. Then there were blank pages, and she thought that was the end of it until she noticed writing on a page further in.

At the top it read: ***Dear El, there's something I need to tell you, but I don't know how.***

*Shit. I shouldn't have read that, she thought. He's trying to write me something? Should I talk to him about it? No, then he'll know I read this. Fuck.*

El put the notebook on her bedside table and exhausted herself staring at it and wondering what it meant. The last thought she had before falling asleep was *maybe Dad's right...*

## 6. The Library

hello peeps here is an update! this is literally just Mike's thoughts and some small interactions with El. idk i don't particularly like this chapter but i can't put my finger on exactly why and how to fix it so please let me know how you feel about it? thanks

let's have a discussion! we had an almost-kiss last chapter and i know when an actual kiss is gonna happen, but i wanna know what you guys think. what chapter do you think the kiss is going to take place (keep in mind there are meant to be roughly around 17) and who is going to initiate it? (●J●)

also hmu on tumblr -urdearestmom- if you wanna cuz like,, discussion!

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A week after his chance dinner with the chief of police, Mike hadn't seen El again outside of school. They'd both been busy with other end of semester projects as well as work (she worked at the ice cream shop in town and he worked at The Hawk down the street), but they had made plans to meet again on Friday (which was today) to start putting their presentation together. They'd spent the week working on things separately, and now it was going to be time to put them together and make sure everything was okay. Then they would have a week and a half before the presentations were due to start to make sure everything was in place and ready to go.

During the week, Mike had had time to think about the things Hopper had said and El's reactions to them. Apparently, she talked about him at home all the time? That was a surprise. Mike had never thought he was interesting enough to be talked about, seeing as his own parents never really seemed to care about anything he was doing, much less someone outside his family. And on top of that, a girl? To her *dad*? Jeez.

And she'd blushed! He'd never seen her do that before. She had also glared at Hopper with a ferocity that scared Mike a little, hoping he'd never see that look directed at himself because he was pretty sure he'd be dead right after. It was the definition of *if looks could kill*.

Hopper had also said he was excited they were *finally* getting to know each other, which, *what the fuck does that mean? Finally?* Taken in conjunction with his previous statement, Hopper was making it sound like El had been wanting to know Mike for a long time, possibly years, which boggled his mind because how had he never noticed? He considered himself an observer, and not noticing something so groundbreaking was, to say the least, unusual.

*What is going on?* He was lying in his bed on Tuesday night when he allowed himself to come to the only conclusion that made sense, no matter how little faith he had in it. *She must like me, or something. But how?* He turned over and stared at the poster of The Dark Crystal he still had on his wall. *What the hell is there about me to like?* But then the giddiness took over, and the stupid smile on his face could not have been a good look for him.

It was on Wednesday morning that Michael Wheeler decided that he was going to take the plunge and ask the girl of his dreams (literally, because he had dreamed about her before) if she would like to go on a date.

So here he was, Friday afternoon after school in the library, sitting at a table near the windows and waiting on El to show up. And show up she did, a few minutes later, but looking like someone had just told her the worst news of her life. It instantly put a damper on his nervous excitement.

"Hey, what's wrong?" He asked, watching her slam her backpack onto the table across from him.

She glared at his books. "I think this fell out of your bag last week." Sitting down, she took a small notebook out of her bag and pushed it to his side of the table. "I had a fight with Max."

Taking it, he noticed that it was his D & D notebook, the one he'd spent the last few days turning his room and the basement upside down for. "Thanks," he said, sliding it into his bag. "Do you want to talk about it?"

El was silent for a few moments, and he was starting to freak out because he thought that maybe those were tears glittering in her

eyes. "It's complicated."

Mike nodded. "Of course, you don't have to tell me. I was just asking." He was trying to keep calm. Everything he'd planned to say about the feelings he'd been sitting on for a while was immediately tossed out the window, concern for El taking over. What could be this *bad*? He'd never seen or even heard of El Hopper crying about anything.

She was *El*. She was a badass, and she was absolutely amazing. Not that crying would make her any less amazing, it just wasn't something he'd ever really considered her doing. He thought maybe it also wasn't a thing she herself ever considered doing.

Sometimes it just happened. He would know.

"It's just-" She started, taking a deep breath. "Her stepdad is an asshole and she needs to report him or something and I've told her to a million times but she doesn't listen! I'm just worried about her," she added in a whisper. "My stepdad was an asshole too."

*Oh Jesus. That's what's bad.* Mike reached across the table to grasp one of her hands. "Well, if you had a fight about it maybe she doesn't want to talk about it right now?" He wasn't going to say it because he didn't want to make El even more stressed out, but hearing about it now made him concerned for Max. He didn't know any of the details, but from El's reaction he could guess that Max's stepdad was not an asshole in the way his own father was (but much, much worse).

She sighed, dropping her head onto her bag. "I don't know what to do, I'm just trying to help but now she's mad at me and I'm afraid things'll get worse and she won't tell me if they do."

Understanding her point, he nodded, even though she couldn't see him. "Okay, but clearly she's not in the best headspace at the moment, so maybe let her cool off a bit before talking to her again?"

El didn't move, but he heard her mumble into the fabric. "You're probably right." She squeezed his hand and he squeezed back in what he hoped was a reassuring way.

Mike didn't say anything for a few moments, waiting for her to make

the next move. After about half a minute of silence, El sat up and pulled a binder from her bag.

"Let's get started, yeah?"

He nodded and they looked over their stuff, but the entire time they were working he could tell that she was miles away. He didn't know what she was thinking and he really wished he did because then he could say exactly the right thing to make her feel better. But people were complex, and of course the universe couldn't make it any fucking easier to understand them.

His mind wandered to Max a few times, wondering how she dealt with a shitty home life so well. Outwardly, she was just a regular girl making the most of her high school career, but now that he knew there was a lot more going on he realized that most of her outward personality was probably a front. He figured she'd be most herself when with El because they'd been friends, well, since El moved to Hawkins, but was she even herself with the boys around? Mike wondered if Lucas knew, but then remembered that it wasn't his business to ask.

And that brought him to another train of thought: Lucas, Dustin, and Max. Dustin very obviously had taken a liking to the redheaded member of their Party, but the girl in question didn't seem like she was interested in that way. However, besides El she was closest with Lucas. Mike wasn't sure if Lucas had lied to him when he'd asked about the nature of the other boy's relationship with her, and it seemed Dustin was insecure about the fact. Tensions had been high between the two recently, as Dustin was of course too awkward to talk to Max without being weird and Lucas was constantly ragging on him about it. It was making Mike and Will quite tired of them.

"Hey." El waved a hand in front of his face. "Earth to Mike? I need to get home, okay?"

He snapped out of his thoughts and started putting his stuff away. "Sorry! Did you want me to walk you?"

She shuffled her feet. "If you want to."

"Kind of funny neither of us has our bikes today, isn't it?" He asked, walking around the table.

El shrugged. "I guess."

She looked tired and like she needed a hug, so on their way to the door Mike ignored the bundle of nerves in his stomach and the little voice in his head telling him it was a bad idea and swung an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close.

"If you ever need anything, I'm here for you, okay?" He said.

"Thanks."

They were interrupted by a girl who looked like a freshman telling them that they made a very cute couple, which left Mike a blushing and stuttering mess of denial.

"It's fine, Mike, just leave it," El sighed. "Can we go, please?"

She didn't say much on the way to her house, only making the random comment on a passing car or the colour of someone's pants every few minutes, but Mike kept his arm around her the whole way, trying to offer some semblance of comfort. It was the one thing he'd always been good at, making people feel comfortable. He would always be open to someone in need.

He dropped her off at her front door with a squeeze. Stepping back, he watched her go inside. "I'll probably see you Monday, but if you need anything at all, call me and I'll be there, alright?"

El didn't say anything for a moment, and Mike took it as his cue to leave. He was only a few steps down the street when he heard the shout and turned around.

"Wait up!" El came running in his direction, coming to a stop and throwing her arms around him. *She's hugging me, oh my god.*

"Thanks again, Mike." She stood back. "You're really sweet," she added, a half-smile on her face, before leaning up and planting a swift kiss on his cheek. *Holy lord almighty!*



She ran back into her house and shut the door before he could say anything, but he was pretty sure she'd had enough time to see the stupid smile she'd caused. Mike walked all the way home with a hand to his cheek and an earsplitting grin. *I am never washing my face again, God, do you hear me?!*

It was only later that Mike considered that maybe the fact that it had been today that El had fought with Max was a sign from the universe, or something. Maybe something was trying to tell him now was not the time to ask her out, maybe never was the time.

The more he thought about it, the more insecure he felt. Friends hugged each other, right? And friends kissed each other's cheeks. It wasn't like she'd done anything to him that she wouldn't have done with any of the other boys. In fact, Mike had noticed that El seemed to click really well with Will. The two were usually the quietest out of the bunch, although Will was overall more of a peacekeeper and El could be a firecracker when she wanted to be.

*Maybe she likes Will. Fuck, maybe she does!* He turned over to the window side of his bed, staring at the wall of science fair trophies and certificates of accomplishment on the other side of the room. *He'd be a better boyfriend than me, that's for sure. I should probably stop... whatever I'm even doing.* "Jesus," he sighed, closing his eyes. His heart hurt. *I am so screwed.*

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DON'T FORGET THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AT THE TOP!

## 7. The Fall

in this chapter we delve into why Mike is an emo binch, courtesy of Will the Psychologist™, Mike and El have another phone call, and we also get to meet Holly and Karen

who is the number one mileven shipper, holly or hopper? leave a comment down below

this is a long ass chapter, my friends, a whole entire 5.2k words but i feel like there's some good shit in here

i changed the rating on this bc someone alerted me to the fact that i probably should last chapter, so that's that

also, my ff readers were more on the mark about the kiss questions last chapter but i'm not going into detail ;)

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By Wednesday at lunch, El was sure that Mike was acting weird. He seemed fine, but she noticed that he was sort of... pulling away from her. *What did I do? God, was it the kiss? I shouldn't have done that.*

She would say something funny and he might laugh, but then he would look down or away and stop, diverting conversation back to the original topic. In history, he took his usual seat and kept his focus solely on taking notes while she spent the entire period sneaking looks at him.

El hadn't spoken to Max since their fight on Friday, but Lucas had and Will had said she was in English, so it was safe to assume that they were still not speaking. So Mike was being weird and Max wasn't speaking to her. *Wonderful. My two best friends suddenly drop me.*

At the end of the day, she was about to leave when Will came running up to her outside the school. "Hey El, wait up!"

She turned and furrowed her brows. "Don't you guys have an AV club meeting today?"

Will nodded, but continued unlocking his bike. "Yeah, but I have a dentist appointment at four and my mom couldn't pick me up, so I have to go." He paused, as if considering something. "And Mike didn't want you to go home alone, since it looks like Max... isn't going."

She snorted. "Nice to know he *does* care."

Will looked at her funny as he seated himself. "Of course he does, have you met him?"

She shrugged and started pedalling. "He's been ignoring me all week." *Damn.* She'd been thinking that for the last few days, but saying it out loud made it real and it hurt. This coming in the middle of her fight with Max was just unfortunate.

Will struggled to catch up to El for a second, but then he rode easily alongside her. "Something probably set him off. He kind of closes up sometimes, when he starts to overthink things. Doesn't do it as much with us, anymore, but you and Max are still kinda new."

El thought it over for a second. "I'm not sure I get what you mean," she said, throwing a glance Will's way.

He hummed. "It's hard to explain. Mike is... loyal to a fault. And he loves big. You know? If you're his friend, he'll defend you if it's the last thing he does, because he cares about you so much. Sometimes I think his heart is too big for his body. The thing about that, though, is that he doesn't think he deserves the same amount of love right back," Will answered, letting his feet onto the ground at the stoplight.

The pair looked both ways before crossing the intersection. "Being the middle child is hard, you kind of get ignored. And the Wheelers seem pretty perfect if you're looking from the outside, but nothing is ever as it seems. His parents are... not in the best place-

"He told me about that," El interrupted, glancing sidelong at the boy again. There were too many thoughts running through her head.

Will nodded. "Good, so you already know that, then. It's not a fun place to be, between your parents who are probably getting a divorce. I can vouch for that, myself," he laughed. "It sucks balls.

After Nancy left for college, Mike was sort of without anyone to talk to. Like, there's us, but it's not the same because they're not *our* parents and we don't live there, either. And now he has to look out for Holly by himself because Nancy isn't here to help, you know?"

"Yeah, he told me about that too."

"But then the thing is also that even growing up, before everybody's marriages started falling apart, things weren't the best. We've talked about it before, and like, the thing kid-Mike wanted most was for his dad to actually pay attention to him."

He shook his head.

"His mom tried but she never really clicked with him, exactly, Nancy was always the perfect child and why put in effort to the second if you already have one? And then Holly came along when we were nine and it was like Mike got sent to the end of the metaphorical line, if you will," Will continued. "Don't get me wrong, he absolutely loves her, but her being born meant all the attention went to her. Then on top of all this, the four of us have always been bullied at school. You know Troy?"

El felt a surge of hot anger at the mention of that disgusting waste of human potential. "Harrington? Yeah."

Will nodded again, keeping an eye on the road ahead of them. "He's always hated us, for some reason. That never helped anybody's self-esteem. All of us get it from Troy, but at least me, Lucas, and Dustin have someone at home that'll actually care. My mom's the best, and Dustin's is a little over the top but she's just like him that way. And the Sinclairs are like, the nicest people you'll ever meet! But when Mike goes home he just has to bottle it up because it's not like anyone's gonna listen to him. He's also not really the type of person to just spill everything he's feeling, so it makes it worse. Eventually something will *really* set him off and he'll explode."

"So he doesn't think he deserves to be loved?"

Will sighed. "That's the underlying thing, I think. I don't know if he himself has realized it. The rationale behind it is kind of 'if my own

parents couldn't care about me why would anyone else, they must be faking it', you see what I mean? He just- starts to overthink things and it plays into his insecurities, and then he lets himself get carried away with it. Like I said, he doesn't get like that much with us anymore because we've been friends for years, but you and Max are new. And he *especially* likes you."

El decided to file that statement away for later. "So, what you're telling me is he doesn't think he deserves to be loved, and then he closes himself off because he's insecure about people who actually like him?"

Will shrugged. "Basically, I guess."

"It's bullshit. He deserves all of it and more."

"Well yeah, we've told him that about a thousand times. It's not like it's gonna make the feeling go away."

"But I want him to know that."

"Make it obvious, then! His problem is probably that he likes you so much and thinks you don't like him back."

"But I do!"

"Then tell him! Look, I gotta go, the dentist's is this way. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" Will saluted and turned right.

"Bye, Will!" He didn't respond. "Motherfucker..."

El pedalled the rest of the way home thinking hard. *How can I make it obvious to Mike that I do like him?* From what Will had said, it kind of sounded like Mike definitely liked her as much as she did him, so she thought that maybe telling him that might be a start. *Will is such a sneaky little shit*, she thought with a smile, *he knows everything*.

He wasn't called Will the Wise for nothing, after all.

---

She was clearing out the kitchen and swinging around to *Crocodile Rock* when she had an idea. It was Wednesday, meaning Hopper had

a late shift and she was going to be alone anyway, so she might as well make use of her free time.

Once she was finished with her dishes, she went over to the phone and dialled the number she'd been given, hoping she'd get Mike on the first try.

"Hi, it's the Wheelers!" It was a little girl's voice, and she sounded so happy that El couldn't help but smile.

"Hi, are you Holly?"

The girl giggled. "That's me!"

"I've heard a lot about you! Listen, is your brother home? I need to tell him something."

El had to pull her ear away from the receiver because Holly started screaming. "MIIIIIIKEEEEEYY! THERE'S A GIRL ON THE PHONE FOR YOU!" There was a beat of silence before Holly came back on. "He said he's coming. What's your name?"

"I'm El."

"IT'S EL, HURRY UP!"

El heard what sounded very much like someone falling and then Holly started laughing, so she could only assume that Mike had fallen and was proven right when Holly whispered into the phone, "He *fell*."

"Shut up, Holly! Jesus... hey, El."

"Hey."

"Sorry you had to deal with her, she's a bit of a handful," laughed Mike.

El smiled. "No, she's a sweetie. You're just biased."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"*You* don't make any sense!"

For a second they just breathed into the phone, then Mike spoke. "So... what did you need?"

She took a breath. *Am I really doing this?* "I just want you to know that I love you and that you deserve to have all the love in the world. You said last week for me to come to you if I ever need anything, and I want you to do the same, okay? We're friends and I care about you."

He didn't respond. *Why did I have to say it like that, fucking Christ... he's gonna take it the wrong way.* She sighed. "I'm sorry, that came out awkward. What I mean is-"

"No, I get it." He sounded a little choked up. "Thanks. I feel like I really needed that."

"It's just- you've kind of been acting weird around me this week and if anything's wrong, if it's something I did, I'm here and you can talk about it."

Mike was silent for a moment again before answering. "It's not you, it's just been a rough few days, you know, around home. And other things I've been thinking about."

*What are the other things, though, Mike?* "Well you can talk to me if you need, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks."

"And actually I need to talk to you about something, but not right now." *I mean, I gotta tell him at some point, right?*

"Alright."

"I'll let you know." *This is getting really awkward.*

"Cool beans."

El stopped breathing for a second. "Did you just say *cool beans*?!"

She swore she could hear him cringe over the line. "That was completely accidental, I swear!"

At that she couldn't hold back laughter. "Alright, weirdo. Have a good night and remember what I said."

"Will do. Night, El."

"Night, Mike."

The next day, Mike seemed back to his usual self. It was a nice change, and something uplifting for El after having seen Max in the hall a few minutes before lunch and been ignored. The past two days, lunch had consisted of Dustin, Will, Mike, and El. Max was avoiding the cafeteria due to El's being there, and Lucas would come in, sigh when Max was nowhere in sight, and leave to go join her.

Today was no different. El sat down next to Mike, on whose other side sat Will, and the three of them faced Dustin, who was moodily picking at his bologna sandwich. About ten minutes in, Mike and Will were quietly discussing something, and Dustin was still only half-finished his lunch.

"What's wrong?" Said El.

The three boys turned to look at her. Anything to get her mind off her angry best friend.

She repeated herself, looking directly at Dustin. "What's wrong?"

He stared. "Nothing's wrong."

"You haven't finished your sandwich and it's been ten minutes," she retorted, gesturing to the sad food item on the table between them. "Something's wrong."

Dustin sighed and looked away. "It's Max and Lucas."

El narrowed her eyes. "Because you like her, right?"

He spluttered. "What- I- what?"

"Come on, man, you're really obvious," said Mike.

Will snorted. "That's ironic."



"Shut *up*, Will."

El rolled her eyes at the other two, remaining focused on her hat-wearing friend. "It's okay, Dustin. It's not like she hates you."

"Yeah, but it's not like she likes me, either," he answered, crestfallen. "And I wouldn't hate them if they started dating because they're both my friends and I want them to be happy, but..."

"But you wish it could be you," Will finished.

Mike perked up. "Lucas told me he doesn't like her like that when I asked him, if it makes you feel any better," he offered.

"It doesn't, but thanks."

No one knew what to say after that, but Dustin finished his sandwich at long last. Between history and math, Mike stopped El to ask if she wanted to go over to his house tomorrow to rehearse for their presentation a few last times. They were to be the first presenters, because their teacher had decided to go in backwards order as the seventies were a decade still fresh for everyone, having lived through it. The earlier decades would be harder to remember, so to make it easier on the students they would be reviewed last. It was good because Mike's favourite thing was presenting and El just wanted to get it over with already.

---

On the Friday afternoon, El found herself riding with Mike and Lucas at the end of the day, watching as Lucas turned in to a blue house and Mike went on ahead of her to the house at the end of the cul de sac, rolling up into the grass and leaving his bike on the ground near a door. Walking in, he turned with a smile.

"Mi casa es tu casa, this is the basement. Home of D & D campaigns and sleepovers galore."

She looked around. The walls were wood panelling and there were several posters tacked to them. A small table was set up near the stairs with four chairs around it, and there was a couch against the wall. There were stacks of boardgames everywhere. On the other side

of the staircase, El could see a washer and dryer as well as stacks of folded clothes in baskets and a hamper.

Looking back at Mike, who still had the very excited smile on his face, she said, "I can almost smell it."

He frowned. "Smell what?"

"The testosterone."

"Are you trying to say that I smell?"

She grinned. "Maybe."

He grinned back, but then it dropped. "So, my mom's out 'cause Holly has dance practice until four-thirty, but... she'll be back."

"And?" *Where is he going with this. Shit.*

"She knows you'll be over here but she might not react to you in the best way so I just don't want you to be offended if she says something dumb," he rushed, avoiding looking at her.

Now El was frowning too. "What do you mean?"

Mike looked at his feet, twisting his fingers. "I told her last night you'd be coming over to work on our project and she was kind of... not nice about it. She says she's heard rumours that you, like... smoke and stuff. Hang around with bad kids."

El scoffed. "I literally don't hang out with anyone but you guys and my dad, the *chief of police*."

"I told her that!" He exclaimed. "She just doesn't really listen..."

"Just because I wear black all the time doesn't mean I'm some kind of punk."

"Well, to be fair, you listen almost exclusively to Ramones and Sex Pistols," Mike said, dropping his backpack onto the sofa. "And like, Circle Jerks? What kind of name is that, honestly."

She knew he was joking, but she still took it to heart. "Joy Division doesn't have a good name either! It sounds cool but the story behind it is disgusting."

"Hey, I like New Order songs better anyway. And I listen to other stuff."

"Right, like A Flock of Seagulls is such a great name."

He glared playfully, walking to the stairs. "For your information, I happen to *adore* seagulls."

"Have you ever even been to a beach, Michael?" She asked, following him up.

"I will have you know that yes, indeed I have. My grandparents live in North Carolina."

"Do you visit often?"

Mike paused at the fridge, looking inside but then closing it and moving to the fruit basket on the counter. "Not really, we see my mom's parents in Louisiana more often. But even them I haven't seen in like, three years."

*Huh.* "So your parents are both from out of state?"

He shook his head. "Apple?" He asked, offering one to her. "Wash it. And no, my mom grew up here in Hawkins, but my grandmother was originally from New Orleans and my grandparents moved back there after they retired. My dad's from North Carolina, came to Bloomington for college and met my mom here when he got a job. They stayed, and here we are."

She nodded, drying off her freshly washed apple. "That's cool. I just know we always lived in the town over from here. Kinda boring."

Mike peered into the oven. "Looks like she left a casserole cooking," he said, then shrugged, turning back to the basement stairs. "Not everybody moves around much."

El was almost down the steps when Mike seemingly tripped on

nothing and went sprawling across the floor, faceplanting hard in front of the couch. She had to hold the bannister with iron strength to keep herself from falling after him, she was laughing so hard.

"Oh- my god-" She choked, giggles streaming out of her mouth.

Mike hadn't moved. "Just leave me here to die," he groaned, face pressed into the carpet.

She jumped the last two steps, put her apple on the table, and made her way over, crouching next to his prone form. "Are you okay?" She asked, still laughing.

He didn't answer, but rolled over to face the ceiling. He looked so *embarrassed*, his face all red and eyes squinty, and it was the cutest thing she'd ever seen. She hooked her arms under his shoulders and pulled him up into a sitting position, proceeding to inspect his head for any signs of a lump. She had her hands tangled fully in his hair when she noticed that Mike was staring at her.

"What is it?" She whispered.

He blinked slowly. "You're so beautiful," he whispered back, his breath fanning across her face.

She looked into his eyes, so dark but always warm, and it was almost like an electric shock ran through her when he looked back at her so intensely. She gripped his hair tighter, pulling his face closer as her eyes started closing. She could see that his were closing too, and his hands were reaching up to her waist from the floor. *OH MY GOD THIS IS HAPPENING. HOLY SHIT I'M GONNA KISS HIM.*

El could just feel the ghost of Mike's lips on hers when a clock bonged the time loudly through the empty house. She jumped back from him, landing painfully on her butt. When she looked at him again, he was glaring at the top of the stairs, where she could only assume the offending clock stood.

"It's three-thirty," he said flatly.

She cleared her throat, avoiding eye contact. "Right, we should get to work."

"Yup."

They didn't speak for a few minutes as El went into the bathroom so they could change into their respective seventies inspired getups. Once inside, she looked at herself in the mirror. Her face was flushed, and she felt hot. *Goddamn it*, she thought, smacking a fist on the counter. *That was even closer than last time! Jesus, the universe must have it out for me.* Aloud, she simply sighed before changing.

It took just under an hour for them to rehearse their presentation in full, after which El took the time to eat her apple as Mike paced nervously, waiting for his mother to come back.

At one point he stopped his pacing and stared at the door in confusion. "Is it *snowing*?!"

El nearly choked on her apple. "Are you sure you didn't hit your head badly? It's May," she reminded him.

"You're right." He resumed his previous activity.

A few minutes later, El interrupted. "Mike, calm down, it's just your mom."

"It's my mom! And you're meeting her! For the first time!"

El rolled her eyes. "It's not like I'm your girlfriend or something, it's not a big deal," she mumbled.

He sucked in a breath, letting it out slowly. "Right. You're not."

"You weren't even this freaked out when you met my dad, and we'd completely forgotten to expect him."

Mike threw his hands up in the air. "Yeah, but I don't think your dad had preconceived ideas about me! Not like my mom does about you!"

El got up and walked over, placing her hands on his shoulders. "Calm. Down. If anyone should be freaking out, it should be me, and I'm not. Stop freaking, if I'm not worried then you shouldn't be either."

They were silent for a moment, which was when they heard the

expectant "Michael?" from upstairs.

"Jesus, I didn't even hear her come in..." Mike trailed off before projecting his voice so he'd be heard. "Yeah, Mom, I'm in the basement!"

"Is your... friend with you?"

He rolled his eyes. "She's here!" Turning, he offered her a hand. "Come on," he said, leading the way to his mother.

Upstairs stood a woman a little taller than El, with perfectly done up honey brown hair and perfectly applied makeup. It was a little intimidating to look at someone who appeared so put together in comparison to how El thought of herself (as a mess, really, who no one except Max and her dad and maybe sometimes the boys particularly liked).

"Hi, Mrs. Wheeler," she said, sticking out a hand to shake. *Be confident. Play it cool, but be polite.* "I'm Jane."

Mike's mom smiled at her, although El felt like it was a little forced. "It's nice to meet you, Jane. Did Michael give you anything to eat? I know he gets a little forgetful, sometimes," she answered.

Mike huffed beside El. "Christ, Mom, of course I did. You say that like I just let my friends starve all the time."

Mrs. Wheeler frowned. "Watch your tone, young man. Did you see Holly?"

"Right here, Mommy!" Came the little voice El recognized as being the same one that had answered the phone when she called. A small blonde girl in a lilac leotard appeared out of nowhere, barrelling toward Mike and wrapping herself around his legs. "Mikey!"

"Why, hello there, Princess Holly!" He bent down to ruffle her hair with one hand, making El very aware of the fact that she was still holding his other one. It was warm and secure, and provided her with a sense of closeness that she found she liked very much. It was really just palms touching, though, and she wondered what it would be like if she laced their fingers together. She looked back at Mrs. Wheeler to

see her staring pointedly at their joined hands.

"Holly, let go of your brother, please. Why don't you go show Jane some of your dolls? I need to talk to Michael for a minute."

Holly excitedly let go of Mike's legs and dragged El around the corner and up the stairs to her room, chattering all the while. Upon arriving, the first thing that El noticed was that it was violently purple. Everything in the room was in varying shades of purple, matching the girl's outfit.

"-and now I'm confused because Mike never talks about anyone named *Jane*," Holly was saying.

El shook her head, finally looking fully at the kid. She was adorable, El could understand why Mike loved her so much. How could he not? "Sorry, what did you say?"

Holly huffed, looking so very much like her older brother that it almost made El laugh. They didn't look alike by appearance, but it seemed that in mannerisms they were the same person. "I said, who are you? Because Mike never talks about anyone named Jane."

"Oh," El said, smiling. "Jane's my real name, but my friends don't call me that. They call me El."

Holly's face lit up. "*You're El?*" *Oh god, she's so cute it should be illegal.*

"That's me!"

Holly grinned. "Is my brother your boyfriend?" *Okay, what?!*

El cleared her throat, feeling a blush rise on her cheeks. "No, he's not."

The eight-year-old turned away, grabbing a few dolls off of a shelf. "Well, he's a mouthbreather, then. Come sit on my bed."

El obeyed, feeling like not doing so would lead to unpleasant consequences. "Can you tell me why he's a mouthbreather?"

Holly handed her one of the dolls. "This is Blue Rhapsody Barbie," she

said, fondly petting the full blue skirt the doll was wearing. "Mike's a mouthbreather because he wants to be your boyfriend but he didn't tell you."

El felt like she could have choked. *Mike wants to be my boyfriend? Did I accidentally take LSD or something?* "How do you know that?" Is what she asked instead.

Holly shrugged, pulling open the dress on another doll. "He told me."

"He just told you that?"

"I asked," the girl clarified. "And he told me."

Suddenly El was very eager for answers. "What did he say?"

Holly was interrupted by the subject of their conversation (speak of the devil and he shall appear) barging in the door and yanking El up off the bed. "Mikey!" She exclaimed. "I was telling El about what you told me."

Mike shook his head, hair flopping. "That's great, Hol, but we need to go back to the basement now. You can talk to her later."

"Mike!"

He closed the door, El following with a smile on her face as she felt his hand in hers again. It was *nice*.

Back in the basement, Mike turned to her again. "Whatever Holly told you, it was probably an exaggeration. You should ignore most of what she says."

El felt her heart drop into her stomach. *Oh*. Mike had probably just told Holly he liked El as his friend and the girl had made it into something it wasn't. El couldn't blame her, she was only eight years old, after all. But she couldn't help the crushing disappointment she felt at the thought.

"But my mom said you could stay for dinner, if you want," he added, looking expectantly at her. "That's usually a good sign," he offered.



"Um, yeah, sure. Hop's working late tonight, anyway. I'll just call him so he knows?" She asked.

"Yeah, go ahead, phone's in the kitchen. I'll be down here."

After a cringe-inducing conversation with her dad, El retreated back to the basement, thanking Mrs. Wheeler for the use of the phone.

("Dad, I'm having dinner at the Wheelers' tonight."

"There something I should know?"

"It's not *like that*, Mrs. Wheeler asked if I wanted to stay and I wasn't going to say no."

"Or you just want an excuse to hang around the boy even longer."

"Dad!"

"You know it's true, Ellie.")

Mike smiled when El came down the stairs. "You good?"

"Yeah, I just need to be home before he is. What are we doing?" She replied.

He shrugged. "We could go over the bits of presentation we're not so sure about, or we could just hang for a bit, dinner'll probably be ready as soon as my dad gets home. Which is in like, half an hour," he said.

They opted for hanging out, not really wanting to sit around in the out-of-fashion clothes they'd been wearing for the past hour and a bit. It was a good distraction from the problems in her life, being with Mike. It took her mind off of the fact that Max was *still* not speaking to her.

At dinner, El met Mike's father, and she now could see what Will meant when he had told her that Mr. Wheeler wasn't a very involved dad. He said hello to her and that was about it, spending the meal stuffing his face with casserole and then disappearing into the living room with a reproachful look from his wife. Instead, El answered a

series of questions from the woman concerning school and her grades, friends, hobbies, and her dad. Mike had nudged her foot with his a few times, hiding a smile as he looked between her and his mom, and Holly grinned at her from across the table the entire time.

Afterward, Mike volunteered to take her home, staying upstairs to talk to his mom while El collected her stuff from the basement. He met her by the station wagon out front with a wide smile on his face. "Let's put your bike in the trunk and I'll drive you," he said.

They did, and about ten minutes later were parked in front of the Hopper residence. "So," Mike interrupted the silence. "My mom says she likes you."

"She does?" It made El happy to know that she'd somehow managed to make an *adult* like her. Moms of the boys you were interested in usually didn't like you very much, but then she guessed that Mike's mom didn't know El liked her son anyway.

He nodded excitedly. "Yeah! She told me you seem like a nice girl, which, yeah, I'd already told her that, but..." he trailed off.

"Parents?" She offered.

"Parents," he agreed.

They sat in silence for a few seconds before El unbuckled her seatbelt. "Well, thanks for the ride, I appreciate it," she said, opening the door. She had half a leg out before she felt a hand grab her wrist.

"Wait, El, I-" She looked back to see Mike looking very conflicted, but what caught her breath wasn't his expression. Her street was dark, the only streetlight being about a hundred yards away, and Mike had cut the engine so the car's headlights weren't on. The moon shone through the windshield and hit his face at just the right angle, illuminating his skin.

It looked like he was glowing, and she felt like she could see every single freckle. The light cast shadows in the hollows of his cheeks, highlighting high cheekbones and a long nose. She knew if he turned his head she'd be graced with the sharp jawline she had watched

develop over the last few years. His eyes, darker than obsidian, reflected the moon and sparkled so brightly that she almost thought they were stars themselves. He held galaxies in his irises and he didn't even know it.

In that moment, Mike Wheeler was the most beautiful person on Earth, and El felt her heart squeeze in the best way. She thought she might be falling in love.

The moment was broken when he let go of her wrist and shook his head. "Never mind. Have a good night, though."

She nodded and went to get her bike out of the trunk. "Good night!" She yelled from her lawn. Mike waved.

El watched the car turn around before heading back the other way. She watched until she couldn't see the red of the taillights anymore, and then felt a small smile make its way across her face as she parked her bike against the side of her house.

*If this is what falling in love feels like, I never want to fall out.*

---

so how do we feel after that

holly vs hopper smackdown?

also i want to get to know you guys more so QOTD: where are you from?

AOTD: i live in toronto

## 8. McFucking Bitchface

lmao i wrote this so fast and it's definitely not as long as last chapter but i think you guys are gonna like it a hella lot ;))

let's just say that bitchface harrington has made a reappearance and things escalated quickly

---

"Ow! Jesus *fuck!*"

"You better shut the fuck up before I pound your teeth in!"

*What did I do to deserve this*, thought Mike. Currently, he was being shoved into a locker by none other than Troy Harrington. The asshole had already clocked him in the jaw while he was unsuspectingly making his way from the washroom to his history class for his presentation with El, and now was violently attempting to fit all six feet and three inches of Mike into a locker that couldn't have been higher than his shoulder.

Troy also kept repeatedly punching Mike in the stomach so that he was winded and couldn't fight back. He supposed it was actually a pretty smart plan; a good way to keep him from bolting away from Troy as he usually did. Finally, dickface managed to get most of Mike inside the locker, leaving only his feet sticking out of it and the rest of him cramped into the much too small space as he tried to avoid Troy's fists. Troy then proceeded to slam the door as hard as he could multiple times, and Mike felt like maybe Troy was trying to break his ankles or something.

"That'll fucking teach you not to mouth off. Who do you think you are, Wheeler, huh? Fucking pussy..." Troy slammed the locker door one last time and then stormed off, leaving Mike with his eyes squeezed shut and trying hard not to scream at the injustice of it all. What the *hell* had he ever done to Troy to warrant the shit he'd had to put up with for the last eleven fucking years of his life?

Mike got out of the locker and leaned his head against the wall next to the block, breathing deeply. He looked at his watch and cursed. *I'm*

*five minutes late, she's gonna kill me.* He wasn't sure if the she he was referring to was El or their teacher, and he wasn't sure whose wrath would be worse. He rushed down the hall as quickly as he could, limping a little because of the door's impact on his poor ankles and holding a hand to his jaw where he knew a bruise was going to be obvious very soon.

Turning to where his class was located, Mike saw El standing outside the doorway of the room looking up and down the hall. When she spotted him coming, she ran to meet him.

"Where the hell have you been?" She exclaimed, but then she noticed he was limping and holding a hand to his face. His hair was also very messy, which it usually wasn't because Karen Wheeler refused to let her son out of the house with what she called a "rat's nest" on his head. "Wait, what happened to you?"

Mike groaned. "I'll tell you later, it's not important. Let's just get to presenting, alright?"

El threw him a sideways glance as she led him through the door as if to say, *Oh, you're definitely telling me, buster.*

He smiled at Mrs. Bubkes as he walked in. She didn't return it. "How wonderful of you to join us, Michael."

"Sorry, I lost track of time in the washroom." Cringing upon hearing what that sounded like out loud, Mike went over to stand on El's other side. She had already drawn their timeline of major events on the board and was just waiting for him to begin.

"So, our project was on the seventies. Raise your hand if you remember those golden years!"

---

By the end of the period, Mike would say that their presentation had gone pretty well. There weren't any major slip-ups and he thought the flow of information might actually be making it into his classmates' heads. Mrs. Bubkes looked pleased. All in all, he thought they'd get a good grade.

Back in the hall during the five minutes between classes, El cornered him and demanded he tell her why he'd been late.

Mike sighed. "Troy..."

Her nostrils flared. "I swear to god, I will punch that bastard's lights out. When I get my hands on him..."

"El, it's fine. He just shoved me into a locker, is all. Tried to close the door but I'm too tall and he just ended up slamming it on my feet. That's why I was limping."

She glared. "He *just* shoved you into a locker? As if that's not bad! But you have a bruise on your face, too."

He looked down, cheeks burning. "Okay, so first he actually clocked me in the face when I came out of the washroom, and then he punched me in the stomach and shoved me in the locker. He left after that, though, so it's fine." Mike wanted nothing more than for the ground to open up and swallow him right there. He couldn't even look El in the face, he was so embarrassed. *God, what a weakling. Can't even keep myself from being shoved into a way too small space. No wonder he called me a pussy, he's right. This is why no one likes me.*

El put her hands on either side of his face and pulled it up so he'd make eye contact with her. "Look at me. Nothing about what he did to you is *fine*. It's *unacceptable*. There's literally no reason for him to do any of the shit that he does to you, so I don't want you blaming yourself."

He blinked, taking in her words.

She paused, then continued. "Remember what I told you? You deserve all the love in the world, you're, like, one of the most amazing people I've ever met! Troy has problems he doesn't know how to deal with, but that's not your fault and it doesn't mean he can take it out on you."

El paused again, anger crossing her face. "I'm still gonna teach him a lesson, though. I'll see you after class." She let go of him and stalked away into her math classroom.

Sitting in English, his last period of the day and his favourite class, Mike was completely unable to keep his focus. He could hear Mr. Reid going on about the significance of the blood Lady Macbeth washed off of her hands, but he wasn't really paying attention. He was thinking about what El could possibly do to Troy.

He knew she was most definitely a force to be reckoned with, and he clearly remembered that the reason they'd even met was because she'd been sent to the office for stabbing the very same asshole with a goddamn screwdriver. But he also knew that Troy was probably insane, and wouldn't have any qualms about hurting El just because she was a girl. Mike didn't want her put in Troy's sights because she'd tried to defend him. He'd gladly take the other boy's beatings for the next eleven years if it meant he'd leave El alone.

When the bell signalling the end of the period rang, Mike's stomach was in knots, and it only got worse when he saw that El was coming down the hall in his direction. *She never does that. She must be coming to get me.*

Indeed, that was exactly why she was there. She grabbed his hand and dragged Mike with her in the direction of the school's entrance, where she claimed to have seen Troy after school every day. Upon arriving in the hall that led outside to the parking lot, Mike saw that Troy was, in fact leaning against the row of lockers closest to the doors, surrounded by his goon friends.

"No, El- don't-" He struggled to keep her back.

"Shut up, Mike. Let me deal with him," she hissed.

He felt like his stomach had fallen out of his ass when she yelled in the direction of the boys by the door. Mike was taller than all of them, but he was skinny and had almost no upper body strength (and no coordination, either). Just one of them could easily take him out.

"Hey, McFucking bitchface!"

*Everyone* in the hall turned to stare, taking in the tall, stick-thin Wheeler kid and the small spitfire that was Jane Hopper standing by his side. She had a look of murderous rage on her face.

The boys didn't answer, not knowing that the name was directed at one of them. "Yeah, I mean you, Harrington!"

Troy smirked and pushed himself off the locker he was leaning against. "What's up? Mayfield finally take me up on that date?"

Mike gulped and internally said a quick prayer for his life as El walked forward to stand close to Troy, bringing him with her as he was still holding her hand. "No, and she's never going to. She has standards," El spat, her eyes narrowed to slits. She seemed to realize in that moment that the hallway was full and whatever confrontation she had planned wouldn't go over well. "Everybody clear out! This isn't going to be pretty."

She then waited until most of the other students were gone, leaving the hall empty but for herself, Mike, Troy, and his beefy friends. The bully leered. "What do you want, then, Hopper? Or have you come to defend pretty boy Wheeler?"

Mike closed his eyes. *He's going to go apeshit on her. I can't let that happen.* "El, I really think we should-"

She looked at him, and he saw the look again, the one she'd given Hopper when Mike was at their house, but it was about ten times angrier. "No. He's getting what he deserves." With that, she turned and socked Troy right in the nose.

He bent over, howling, and his buddies backed up. "You broke my nose!"

El whipped something out of her pocket and held it under Troy's chin, forcing him to stand straight. Glinting in the sunlight streaming through the doors, Mike saw that it was a screwdriver. He was so shocked by her punch that all he could think was, *Huh. Guess she wasn't kidding when she said she carried it around.*

Troy's nose was bleeding and it looked crooked, appearing to have been broken just as he'd said. El glared at him, digging the point of the tool further into the skin under his chin. "Do you want to fucking try that again? You remember what happened last time. If you so much as lay *one finger* on my boyfriend again, I will fucking gut you.



And you can't do anything about it because is the chief gonna believe you over his daughter? I don't think so," she seethed. "Don't even fucking *look* at him, Harrington, I swear to god."

The group of boys surrounding Troy looked scared, and were avoiding looking at Mike. Troy gulped and opened his mouth, probably to say some stupid shit, but El pushed the screwdriver up and he closed it. "Get the fuck out of here before I do something I regret, assholes."

They didn't need another warning, James bodily hefting the limp Troy over his shoulders and the rest of them running out the doors as quickly as they could.

Mike's throat was dry when El turned to face him, satisfied that the assholes had left. "I'm sorry you had to see-"

"I'm your boyfriend?" He croaked.

She let go of his hand quickly and blushed, looking away. "I know, I know, it just came out. Just pretend I didn't say that."

He closed his eyes tightly for a few seconds, then opened them again and El was still standing there, still blushing at the fact that she'd accidentally called Mike her boyfriend. This was real. *HOLY SHIT.*

"Can I kiss you?"

Her eyes snapped to his. "What?"

"Can- can I-" She cut him off by nodding, and that was all the incentive he needed. He reached his hands to her waist and pulled her closer, bending down to press his lips gently to hers. For a few seconds it was just that, lips touching lips, but then El's arms wrapped around his neck and one hand went into his hair and somehow they were closer.

It was everything Mike had ever dreamed it would be, and he had dreamed of this moment a ridiculous amount of times before. Her lips were soft and warm, and for a first kiss it wasn't too bad. A shiver ran down his spine and he felt like there had been a fire burning in his chest that had just spread to the rest of his body. All of him was

warm when he pulled back from her to breathe. He only had to look at her face to want it again.

"Holy shit," he breathed.

El opened her eyes and giggled at his expression. "You look like you just narrowly missed getting hit by a train," she said.

"It feels like I did," he answered. "Can we do that again?"

In response, she simply leaned up and kissed him again. And *god*, was it amazing to be kissed by El Hopper. It felt like everything in the world was alright if she was kissing him, and nothing could ever go wrong again.

She pulled back this time, looking up at him with a smirk. "So what does this mean?"

"Well, I hope it means you like me because I like you so much that sometimes I don't know what to do with it," Mike said nervously.

She frowned. "You're a dumbass if you think for a second that I don't like you. I probably like you more than you like me."

"Hate to break it to you, but that's scientifically impossible."

"Sure it is."

"Hmm, maybe. You *are* the one that accidentally said I was your boyfriend, after all."

"Shut up!" She shoved him playfully and he caught her hand, lacing their fingers together.

"El Hopper," Mike started, "Will you take upon yourself the arduous task of being my girlfriend?"

At that, she grinned. "There's nothing I'd rather do."

Mike's heart soared.

---

so how do we feel now?

QOTD: do you have any siblings, and if so how many and are they older/younger than you?

AOTD: i have 2 brothers, both younger (one is 13 and one is 6)

## 9. The Date

sorry for the long ass wait i have been struggling and juggling a lot of shit but i have posted stuff on my tumblr so if you wanna head over there it's urdearestmom!

happy international women's day and hope you enjoy!

---

After leaving the school and relaying the incidents to Will and Dustin, Mike had been dragged by El down to the police station to see if Hopper was free for a few minutes. Standing outside next to their chained bikes, Mike was trying to keep up a confident facade, but inwardly he was freaking out. *I'm now dating the police chief's daughter. He's going to kill me. Or arrest me for even **thinking** about it! Is that allowed? Shit.*

"I really would rather not die today, you know?"

Her grip on his hand tightened for a moment as if to reassure him. "My dad's not gonna kill you, you mouthbreather, he likes you."

El started walking toward the entrance as her now-boyfriend spluttered behind her.

"He liked me when we were friends!"

She turned around and fully stared at him for several long moments. "Mike, trust me, he likes you. I don't know which one of us wanted to date you more."

**WHAT.**

Mike watched her cringe (slowly shrivelling up inside himself), instantly regretting opening her mouth when she registered the word vomit that had come out of it.

"Which one of us wanted *me* to date you more! Me! Not him!"

He swallowed. "Fuck, El, don't scare me like that."

She rolled her eyes and huffed, starting to walk forward again. "Come on, he's gonna be happy this finally happened. And now I can use this to make him tell me all about that woman he's been seeing."

"There's a woman?"

"No, Mike, there's a *man*."

"Wait- I'm confused. Like, does he swing both ways or something? 'Cause it's totally cool if he does, you know."

"Can you not, I'll tell you later. Hi, Flo," El said, nodding to the woman at the desk near the door.

Flo smiled, looking at them over her glasses. "Hello, sweetie. You here to see Hop?"

"Yeah, is he in? Mike and I have some news for him," El answered, holding up their joined hands.

Flo's gaze wandered toward Mike, travelling up at least three feet to reach his face. "So, this is the boy, then? Hop's in his office."

El smiled back. "Yeah, this is him. Thanks again, Flo, have a good day!"

Mike's mind was left reeling (*what does she mean, is this the boy?*) as he followed his girlfriend (*oh my god!*) down the hall, pausing behind her at a door marked **CHIEF**.

She knocked and then entered, letting go of his hand and motioning for him to stay outside. His hand was cold now that it wasn't holding hers. It felt empty and weird and Mike didn't like it.

"Kid? What are you doing here, something happen?" Hopper's gruff voice sounded from inside the small room.

"Big news, daddy-o. Guess who got asked out today?"

*Well that was straight to the point. Daddy-o?*

Mike heard Hopper make a noise that sounded halfway to a laugh.

"Wheeler finally get his head back on Earth long enough to notice the obvious?"

"Actually, it was a partial move from both of us, you know how it goes."

"Actually, I don't."

El sighed. "You can come in now," she called.

Mike took a shaky breath (*ohmygodohmygodohmygod*) and then walked through the half open doorway, coming face to face with the man himself. Hopper gave him an appraising look and watched with what seemed to be amusement as Mike's hand latched back onto El's, lacing their fingers together again and restoring a semblance of peace to his soul.

"I asked her out," he began, avoiding eye contact, "but she accidentally called me her boyfriend first, so..."

At that, the large man let out a full laugh and Mike felt courageous enough to look up. El was smiling and it didn't seem like Hopper was at all displeased. "Oh, Jesus, what a slip-up, Ellie! Classic," he said, running a hand down his face.

"So that's what we came to tell you, Dad. Now you can't avoid me asking about the woman," El smirked.

Hopper shrugged, turning back to his paperwork. "Sure I can."

"You said if *this*," she shook the hand intertwined with Mike's in Hopper's direction, "happened, that you would tell me about her!"

"I did no such thing."

Mike watched the exchange with interest, trying to remember a time when his own father might have been like that with him. (Additionally, he wondered what woman would like Hopper enough to go on dates with him.)

"Oh my *god*, Dad, why can't you just tell me?!"

Hopper rolled his eyes. "You're the one who voluntarily told me about the boy, I never asked. And again, you're the one who got suspicious, I never told you there was a woman."

"But I know there is!" El cried, starting to get impatient.

"Hey, El," interrupted Mike, tugging on her hand. "I'm sure he'll tell you when he's ready. There's no use in getting all frustrated for nothing, it's just a waste of energy. And I don't know about you, but I could *really* go for a milkshake right now."

El huffed again, but a second later her face broke into a shy smile. "Okay."

Mike beamed. "Great! We should go, then," he said, looking to Hopper. "Have a good day, sir."

Hopper raised his mug of coffee to his mouth and then paused right before taking a sip. "Wheeler."

Mike turned back halfway to the door, gulping. "Yes, sir?"

"You're a pretty good kid, aren't you?"

"I think so?"

Hopper raised his eyebrows. "I expect you to treat my daughter with the respect she deserves, you hear? If you mess up it won't be me you'll have to worry about."

Mike stood straight, this being one of the only things in his life he'd ever been one hundred percent sure about. "Of course I will, that's my job as a decent human being. And I know she's more than capable of holding her own. Right, El?"

She nodded from behind him, the shy smile still on her face as she watched the two interact.

Hopper took a long sip of coffee before setting the mug back down and opening a new folder. "She's really liked you for a while, you know? I mean, I don't really see why but-

"Jesus *Christ*," El groaned. "Can you keep from embarrassing me for two seconds, it's really not that hard."

Hopper laughed again and looked back at the young couple in his doorway. "Get outta here, milkshakes are half off on Mondays."

---

Ten minutes later, the two were seated in a window booth at the half-empty ice cream shop, El sipping a strawberry shake and side-eyeing Mike for his choice of plain vanilla.

"They're half off and I get an employee discount and you choose *vanilla*? Really?"

Mike took offence to that statement, fixing El with a playful glare. "If you're just going to criticize my flavour choices, you can leave."

She sucked on her straw, looking pensive. "No, I think I like the rest of you too much to leave because of one vanilla," she answered.

At that, he had to smile. It had been approximately half an hour since the best kisses in the history of kissing (in Mike's inexperienced opinion) and he still couldn't quite believe that any of it had transpired.

El grinned in return. "You're literally the cutest fucking thing I've ever seen and I don't think I'm ever going to be over you liking me back," she said.

He scoffed. "As if, I'm never gonna be over you liking *me* back!"

"Okay, but have you had a crush on me since eighth grade?"

He stared at her. *The fuck- wait.* "You've liked me since *eighth grade*? You had a crush on me?!"

She blushed and ducked her head in embarrassment. "I can't believe I just said that, but yeah. First day, I saw you in the hall wearing the ugliest sweater known to man but you were, like... *cute*. I don't know, I just liked you from the get-go. Then you were in my homeroom and third period so I got to creepily watch you from the side of the classroom every day, and let me tell you," she said, pointing her



straw at him, "that you have exactly zero bad angles."

"But you had a *crush on me?!?*"

El rolled her eyes. "I'm dating you, mouthbreather."

Mike sat back. "Yeah, but in a friends way or a romantic way? You're unclear."

She wrinkled her nose. "Dating implies romance and is not for people who are only friends," she retorted dryly.

"I concede." He smiled again, sucking some milkshake into the straw. He didn't know how he was drinking it at all, it felt like his insides had disappeared and there were just butterflies filling his body. He couldn't *even* believe. "But you had a crush on me, oh my god." *I want to kiss her again. Holy Jesus.*

El frowned, looking out the window.

Mike swallowed. "Sorry, I'll stop, I know I'm-"

"It's not you..." He turned to see Barb Holland, Nancy's childhood friend, walk past down the street.

He wrinkled his nose. "That's Barb, she's Nancy's friend since like first grade. Reminds me, Nancy'll probably be back soon, if Barb's already here. I think she'll like you," he added.

She sighed. "It's just... Max is still mad at me. And now that this," El gestured across the table at him, "happened, I want to tell her but she's not talking to me."

Now Mike frowned. "Honestly, it didn't sound like something so big when it first happened. You said you'd told her the same thing a million times, so why is she so mad this time?"

El looked into her half-finished shake. "I didn't tell you what it was entirely about."

He scooted closer and hooked his right ankle around her left, their Converse laces tangling. "Hey," he said, leaning forward. "Look at

me."

She looked, and he took it as an opportunity to lean closer and give her a quick kiss, capitalizing on a sudden burst of courage. It was only for a second but he felt like he had dropped off the world's tallest roller coaster and landed in a giant mug of his mom's hot chocolate, a shock of warmth radiating from his core down into his toes and all the way up into his head.

"You don't have to tell me, but I know how important Max is to you and I think you both need to talk to each other," he said, looking into her eyes as he sat back and lay his hand over hers.

Mike saw her visibly gulp, taking another sip of her milkshake before speaking. "It was because I saw that she had an old bruise that I didn't remember being new. She usually comes over after something happens and we talk and I... comfort her, I guess. As best I can," El said, looking at the hand under his.

"Okay, that doesn't sound bad." He cocked his head. "Well it does, but that's not what I meant."

"No, but the thing is that she hadn't told me. It was an old bruise that she hadn't told me about, and she always does. I guess I was hurt and I thought she didn't trust me for some reason and I got mad at her, which was stupid. And then she got mad at me for getting mad at her because she said the reason I hadn't noticed in the first place was because I was so focused on you."

She raised her eyes to meet his. "That's why I didn't tell you the entire thing when it happened, I couldn't have just said that to your face."

His stomach dropped at her expression. "El, listen, I'm sure she was just feeling hurt that you'd been paying less attention to her. You guys have been inseparable since you moved here, and when it feels like your best friend isn't as close to you anymore it hurts like hell. She's probably not even mad at you anymore, just confused about how to talk to you."

"Do you really think so?"

Mike flipped his hand over and squeezed hers. "I may not know Max as well as you do, but if there's one thing I'm sure about it's that you're her best friend. Actually, scratch that," he said, looking directly at El. "You're her family. Maybe you're not her blood-sister, but you might as well be."

That made her smile, and seeing her smile made Mike smile too. "I think I'll try to talk to her tomorrow then," El decided, withdrawing her hand but tightening her ankle and swinging their feet.

"And for the record," said Mike, taking another sip of milkshake, "I'm flattered and all that apparently you were obsessed with me-"

"Mike."

"-but friends deserve as much attention as boyfriends." He blushed, feeling the heat and deciding to hold his glass to his cheek to try and cool his face. "I still can't believe that. I'm *your* boyfriend. Holy shit."

El shook her head, grinning.

"I mean, I never thought I'd be *anybody's* boyfriend, but realistically there had to be someone out there that would eventually like me, right?"

"You're looking at her, Michael."

"That's gross, don't call me that."

The couple walked out five minutes later, swinging their hands as they made their way to their bikes.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to Mike. "Hey, does this count as our first date?"

El shrugged, unlocking her bike. "If you want it to."

"But what do you think?"

"I think that if this was our first date, it was the very best first date I've ever been on," she said, smiling.

He grinned back. "Then I guess this was our first date."

She pulled him down by the collar of his striped polo and planted a kiss square on his mouth, leaving Mike feeling lightheaded and with his stomach in knots. "To many more," she answered, a mischievous look alighting on her features.

---

The next day, Mike was in the last stretch of riding home, Lucas pedalling alongside him, when a question he'd been meaning to ask the other boy floated into his conscious mind.

"Hey, Lucas?"

Lucas grunted in response.

"Do you like Max?"

"We've *talked* about this."

"Okay, well, I wasn't sure if you lied to save face or something."

"Friends don't lie, Mike."

"We made that up when we were eleven because Dustin cheated at Monopoly, dude."

Lucas huffed. "Your point?"

"Point is, friends lie to each other all the time!"

The bandana-wearing boy rolled into his driveway and Mike followed him up to his door. "Dude, come on, why can't you just answer?"

Lucas rolled his eyes. "Because I've already told you I don't like her like that," he answered, opening the door.

"You really look like Erica when you do that, you know?" Mike called. "When you roll your eyes!"

"You'd look like that too if you had to live with him!" Came a girl's voice from inside.

"Shut *up*, Erica!" Lucas turned back to Mike. "Look, I don't like her like that. I used to, back in like, eighth grade. But we're just friends. Dustin on the other hand..."

Mike nodded. "He needs to do something about it."

"Yeah," Lucas agreed. "It's just hard because Max and El are fighting."

"They might not be, anymore," said Mike. "El said she was gonna talk to Max today, so hopefully they fix things."

"That's good. How do you know that anyway?"

At that Mike looked at his feet, blushing. It'd completely skipped his mind that Lucas hadn't been informed of the events of the previous afternoon. "Oh, um- we're kind of a thing now. Since yesterday. We went on a date."

He looked up to see Lucas scrutinizing him before he broke out into a wide smile. "That's great, man. I'm happy for you guys."

"Thanks, Lucas."

"*Lucas!*"

Lucas sighed. "I should go before she steals my shit again. See you tomorrow, Mike."

---

After dinner, Mike was helping his mother clear the kitchen when the phone rang. Karen looked at it, then looked back to where she was elbow-deep in dishwater. "Mike, can you get that, please?"

"Yeah, just a second!" He called from the dining room, pushing in his father's chair. He made his way into the kitchen and answered the phone, picking at the collar of his shirt. "You've reached the Wheelers, Mike speaking."

"Mike!"

He grinned at the sound of her voice. "Hey, El."

"Guess what!"

"I'm gonna take a guess and say things worked out with Max?"

"Completely! You were right, she wasn't mad anymore. We worked our stuff out and we're okay now."

"That's really great!"

"And you will not *believe* what she told me..."

Mike hung up the phone a few minutes later with a soft, "Night, El." He couldn't stop the smile on his face and walked over to Karen all pink-cheeked and bright-eyed. "Do you want me to finish the dishes, Mom?"

She eyed her son. He *never* willingly offered to do housework. He was either told or just started doing it of his own volition. "No, that's fine, I'm almost done anyway. Can you make sure Holly gets into bed, though?"

"Sure. Night, Mom. Love you," he said, pressing a kiss to her cheek and heading to the stairs.

"Good night, sweetie."

Half an hour later, he was in his room after a shower and Holly's bedtime routine and slipped his headphones on, tuning to the oldies station on his Walkman.

("Why are you smiling like that?"

"None of your beeswax, Holly."

"Did you tell El you like her?"

Silence.

"Actually, I did."

Holly clapped.

"Is she your girlfriend now?!"

"Would you like that?"

"Yessssss!"

"Then I'll tell you, but you can't tell Mom or anyone else, okay?"

"Okay."

"Yeah, El's my girlfriend."

Matching grins.)

*Put your head on my shoulder*

*Hold me in your arms, baby*

*Squeeze me oh-so-tight*

*Show me that you love me too...*

---

how did you like it? also the part in the ice cream shop when el says mike is the cutest thing the face he's making is the same as that one picture of finn drinking from a tims cup (if you haven't seen it i am sorry for you because he is the most adorable bean!)

additionally idk if walkmans had radios by 1988 so i'm using some artistic license here

QOTD: can you play any instruments and if so how long have you played them?

AOTD: i played clarinet for 6 years but i can't play anymore and have been playing piano for the past 6 years and still going :)

## 10. The Conversations

wassup binches it is i back with an update

i wrote this almost all today wow look at me go! today we see the return of max and some interesting developments both with hopper and with mike ;))))

i don't know when the next chapter will be as i have exams really soon that i need to focus on so i hope this is enough to tide you guys over until i can post again!

---

She was dangerously close to exploding. If she had to hear one more giggle out of those girls in the corner of the locker room, well... *God help them.*

El had taken off her sweaty gym shirt and was shoving it into her bag, leaving her standing in her bra and shorts, when Jillian Hackett called out to her.

"Hey, Hopper!"

"What?" She shot back.

The other girl looked at her with a smirk as El wrestled her clean shirt on over her head. "Is it true you and Mike Wheeler are dating?"

"Why does it matter?" She answered, muffled.

"We just want to know what he's like," piped up a second, unidentified, voice.

"I bet he's all awkward. Probably never even touched a girl before this one. That noodle bod any good?" Sniped a third.

Increasingly frustrated, El decided to just go to class with her shorts still on. Hefting her bags over her shoulder, she extended her middle finger in the girls' direction and snapped, "If you wanted to know what he's like, *you* should have dated him before he was taken," then stormed into the hall. She walked into English huffing, and took her



seat by the window in silence.

Two weeks. It had been *two weeks* since the gossip general public had been made aware of El and Mike's newfound relationship, and she was tired of people asking questions.

*Is it true?*

*Oh my god!*

*I can't believe it!*

*Wheeler got a girlfriend?*

*Who would wanna date her?!*

*That's **so** weird...*

Was it really that hard to comprehend that all they were was two people who made each other insanely happy and wanted to keep doing so? El didn't think it was. She jumped when someone tapped her shoulder, turning around to face Dustin.

"Hey, are you okay?" He asked, sounding concerned. "You're still in gym shorts and you look mad."

She let out a frustrated sigh. "I'm just *tired* of people asking me about Mike. Sorry asses wish they were half as great as he is," she grumbled, looking up at her friend. "Half as great as any of you. You guys and Max are the best friends I've ever had, you know?"

Dustin grinned. "You're pretty awesome too. And they'll get over it, school's almost out and by the time we come back no one will care anymore."

"But it's been *two weeks*," she groaned, pushing her face into her hands.

Dustin patted her back. "Give it time."

---

In history, Mike had moved his seat to the one next to hers, and she

leaned over to give him a half-hug as she sat down.

"Hi."

"Hey," he responded, smiling.

She smiled back. "You're so precious when you smile, did you know that?"

"Well I guess I do now," he said, tapping his pen on the cover of his notebook. "Will and I have something to talk to you about, can you meet us in the AV room after school?"

"Sure, but what about the others?"

"Will told them the three of us are staying back today, nobody argues if Will says it."

"You know," she said slyly, "Sometimes I wonder if it's you or Will that's the unassigned leader."

Mike opened his notebook and wrote the date across the top of the page. "Maybe you should ask him."

"Maybe I will."

"Gre-"

"Mister Wheeler, Miss Hopper, would you care to join the class?"

They turned to their teacher, faces alighting in embarrassment. "Sorry, Mrs. Bubkes."

After the lesson, the pair departed with a swift kiss on the cheek from El and a "See you later," from Mike, leaving them both with huge, sappy grins as they made their way to their last classes of the day. While Mr. Gagliano explained how to write sine and cosine functions from a graph, El's mind kept wandering to what Mike and Will wanted to talk to her about. *I wonder what's going on...*

It was not what she expected at *all*. Truthfully, she didn't know what she'd been expecting, exactly, but it was definitely not what Will told

her.

"I'm sorry, can you repeat that?!" She exclaimed, staring incredulously at the two boys in front of her.

Will sighed. "I caught our parents together."

"I think I'm gonna be sick."

Will looked affronted and Mike tried to suppress a laugh, turning to the radio on the table and fiddling with it to keep his nervous energy in check. "My mom's not that bad, El!"

She grimaced. "Not what I meant. I just- did you, like, walk in on them, or..."

Suddenly Will was looking like he wanted to vomit. "Oh, ew. No, I walked into my house right as your dad was leaving it. He just kind of gave me this weird look, like- I don't even know. And then my mom took like fifteen minutes to come out of her room, so I think we can guess what happened."

"Jesus *Christ*."

At that, Mike let out a snort. "Guess you found out who the woman is after all, El."

She rounded on him. "You knew about this?!"

He held his hands up defensively. "I was with Will last week and he told me, but we weren't sure if we should tell you."

El shut her eyes and held her fingers on the bridge of her nose. "I cannot believe that man right now. He didn't tell me! He is so getting it when I see him."

There was a pregnant pause before El spoke again. "At least I know who she is. And that she's a good person. Not as bad as it could be, I guess." She looked at the boys. "I didn't realize how weird I would feel about my dad being in the dating scene until I actually had proof that he's in it."

They stared at her in silence until she reached over to grab Mike's arm and drag him out of his seat. "Let's go, you dummies, I'm hungry."

"I have the car today 'cause my mom and Holly are on a field trip, do you guys wanna grab burgers or something?" Asked Mike as the trio made their way out of the high school.

Will shook his head. "I gotta get home and do some homework, I'm working tonight."

El frowned. "And I'm hungry, but not in the mood for grease."

Mike rolled his eyes. "Traitors, the both of you. I'll drop you at home, though, Will, put your bikes in the trunk, yeah?"

---

Twenty minutes later, El was looking out the window of the Wheelers' station wagon as they pulled up to Mike's house. It didn't seem like anyone else was home. Once she'd gotten out and was making her way to the front door, she turned to see her boyfriend leaning against the side of the car and staring at her.

"You enjoying the view?" She called jokingly.

He looked at his feet, and even from a distance El could see his face colouring. Abruptly, Mike looked back up, complexion red as a beet. "You're just really pretty!"

She felt her heart melting. Who gave him permission to be the cutest person alive?

"Also I like it when you wear shorts," he added, stopping in front of her with a lecherous grin.

She gave a fake gasp and slapped his arm. "Stop undressing me with your eyes, you scoundrel!"

Laughing, Mike let them inside and made his way to the fridge. "You want anything to drink? We have OJ, skim milk, what else- um- we have-"

El was in the living room looking at a picture of a young woman with short hair and bright blue eyes. *Is that-*

"Oh, that's Nancy," said Mike from behind her. "Have you never seen a picture of her before?"

El shook her head. "She's pretty."

"I guess," he answered, sounding slightly disgusted.

She stepped back and turned around to go into the kitchen, looking to see what she wanted to eat. Selecting an apple and walking to the sink to wash it, El considered her next question. "She's not home yet?"

Mike let out an audible breath, tossing a package of Oreos down onto the counter. "No, she- she called last week and said she isn't coming home until July. Something about working," he replied, sounding upset.

El took a bite out of her apple, considering him. "Do you miss her?"

He sighed, taking out three cookies. "Sometimes, when my parents get really bad. It was easier when she was here, 'cause then she was the oldest and she took charge. And they've had a bunch of fights *about* her since she called. I think she's just trying to delay coming home so she doesn't have to stay long."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" Mike looked up, quirked an eyebrow.

"That your parents are like that. It sucks."

"It does," he agreed. "I almost wish they'd just split already so Holly doesn't have to hear them fight anymore. I don't care about myself at this point, but she's only eight."

They stood in silence, chewing and thinking.

"Do you wanna go do homework?" Mike asked, smiling through a mouthful of Oreo.

El grinned, a thought popping into her head. *Maybe this'll clear his mind.* "I can think of better things to do in an empty house..."

Mike's eyes widened.

"...but not with your mouth full of cookie like that."

His shoulders dropped and he swallowed the Oreos as quickly as possible, taking a swig of milk to clear up any remaining crumbs. "What, um- what did you have in mind?"

She stepped closer to him, bringing her arms up around his neck and drawing her face up to his. "Something like... this?" She whispered, and then she kissed him.

Her heart plunged and she didn't know where it went. She didn't particularly care, either. She just wanted to focus on the feeling of his lips pressed against hers, their soft firmness applying that small amount of pressure that made her toes curl in her socks. She felt like she had been thrown into the sky to fly and she was *soaring*.

Mike opened his mouth and licked along her bottom lip. El drew back, making a face at the sensation. "What was that?"

He didn't make eye contact. "I- I don't know, I've never done this before, I just- I won't do it again, sorry."

She smiled warmly, almost laughing at his bashful expression. "No, I- I kind of liked it. Could we maybe try again?"

His lips were on hers once more, her hands rising into his hair and his to cup her face. He opened his mouth and licked along her lower lip again, and she opened hers in response. Their tongues brushed for a moment before their faces were apart a second time.

"That was the weirdest thing I have ever felt," Mike said, voice breathy.

"Mmm, come back," El replied, dragging his face down.

The next few minutes were spent exploring what they could do with their mouths, and to El it was absolute delirium. It was a little messy,

but she didn't care. Being with Mike, like this, brought her a feeling she couldn't name. It was hot and cold at the same time, sending shivers down her spine and making goosebumps appear on her arms. She felt like she was on fire. *What is happening to me?!*

She pulled away with a wet sound and looked into Mike's eyes, darker than she'd ever seen them. They were almost black, sparkling with what she thought might be that same undefinable feeling she was having. Her heart was beating a thousand miles an hour, somehow having found its way back into her chest. Breathing hard, El smiled.

"I think I could love you," she said.

Mike squeezed his eyes shut, a euphoric grin taking over his face. "I think I could love you too."

---

For the next seventy-two hours, all El could think about was when her next to chance to lock lips with the boy of her dreams could be. They'd kissed again, sure, but nothing like what had happened in the Wheelers' kitchen on Tuesday, and she was going to go insane if she didn't a) do it again, or b) find something to distract her.

Luckily, a distraction came her way in the form of one Maxine Mayfield asking if they could have a sleepover that night.

"We haven't hung out just the two of us in a while and I kind of miss you, El," said the other girl, and El immediately started formulating plans about what they could do all night.

"I get off work at ten, so you can hang with my dad for a bit or just come by later," she suggested. "I'm so excited! I miss you too, Maxie."

Mike and the other boys were great friends, fantastic even, but sometimes a girl just needed another girl. And what better friend could a girl ask for than Max?

El spent her entire six hour shift at the ice cream shop alternating between three trains of thought: kissing Mike, the sleepover with Max, and the fact that she still hadn't been able to speak to Hopper

about his escapades with Will's mom.

Inconveniently, he had had late shifts on both Tuesday and Thursday nights, along with Wednesday when he had his usual late shift. In the mornings, she had to leave for school before he was awake, and after school she only got home right before he left, so she hadn't even really *seen* her dad in three days, much less talked to him.

She was making it her mission to corner him tomorrow, after Max left. She knew he didn't have work tomorrow, so he wouldn't need to leave the house unless, god forbid, there was an emergency.

"I'm home!" She called, stepping inside the house and toeing off her sneakers at the door. "Hey, Dad," she said, leaning over the couch where he was watching Miami Vice and placing a kiss on his scruffy cheek.

"Hey, kid," he answered. "How was your day?"

"Pretty bland, but Max is sleeping over."

Hopper shrugged. "I know, she ate all the popcorn and has been in the bathroom for the last ten minutes."

El shook her head with a fond smile. "Only Max. We'll be in my room, Dad."

"Have fun!"

"Max?" She called, knocking lightly on the bathroom door. "I'm going to my room, when you're done come find me."

A few minutes later, the redhead joined El in her room, patting her hands dry on her jeans. "So what are we doing tonight?"

It was one in the morning when Hopper poked his head into his daughter's room to find the two girls lying on the bed, deep in conversation. "I'm going to sleep, wake me up if you need anything, alright? Don't stay up too late."

El looked back at him, suddenly overcome with affection for the burly man even if she *was* going to have to weasel his life details out



of him later. "Thanks, Dad. Good night."

She turned back to Max as he shut the door. "So..." She trailed off, a wicked smile unfurling on her face.

"What?" Asked Max defensively. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Oh, so you don't remember what you told me?"

"El, I already told you he doesn't need to fucking *know*."

"Why not, though?"

Max gave an angry sigh, flipping over onto her back. "Just because *your* boyfriend is practically in love with you doesn't mean who I like likes me back. You've got rose-tinted glasses on."

El wrinkled her nose. "He is *not* practically in love with me!"

"Actually, let's talk about that!" Deflected Max. "He so is!"

"Actually, let's get back to Dustin," retorted El. "Because he likes you!"

"Does not," the other girl grumbled.

"Have you asked him?"

"No."

"Then how do you know he doesn't like you?!"

"He just doesn't, okay?" Max exclaimed. "Nobody likes me."

"Oh, come on, Max, you're great."

"Yeah, as a friend, maybe," she said.

"Shut up, you'd be a great girlfriend. And guess what, I'm not just saying that he likes you. I *know* he does. Don't you trust me?" El asked.

Max sighed again. "Yeah, but... I just- why would he, though? He's

funny and smart, and he's such a nice guy. I'm just... me."

"Yeah, you are just you," replied El, a heat coming into her words at the thought of her best friend thinking so lowly of herself. "But that's what makes you awesome. You're strong, and funny, and you're smart too. And you're such a badass! You're also one of the only girls that's ever been nice to me in school, and you deal with such a shitty family that I don't know how you manage not to just snap at everyone else."

She took a breath before continuing, watching Max look up at her with wide eyes. "You're amazing, Maxie, and I don't ever want you to think you're not."

Max reached out for El's hand, squeezing it affectionately. "Thanks, Ellie. I guess I just- that means a lot. Thank you."

There was silence for a moment before Max smirked and pulled El down beside her. "But can we talk about the lovely Mister Wheeler now, please? I need the details I missed because I was being an ass."

*This* she could talk about. El launched into a retelling of all that had occurred between herself and said boy in the last two weeks before ending with a whispered, "And we kind of made out the other day."

"Holy shit, you did?! How was it?!"

"It was amazing," she stated dreamily, unaware of the soft smile gracing her countenance.

"You sound so lovestruck, it's hilarious," chortled Max.

El narrowed her eyes. "Maybe I am," she countered. "He makes me feel that way. Like nothing bad will ever happen again if I just stay kissing him. I don't know what it is, but I never want to let go of it."

Max hummed. "Where was it? I hope it wasn't the cliché car makeout."

"No, it was in his kitchen," El answered casually, watching her friend's eyebrows shoot up.

"His *kitchen*?! Who started that?"

El laughed a little, thinking about the situation made her feel warm all over again. "Nobody was home, so I decided to take the opportunity and then that happened."

"Wow."

"I *know*."

---

In the afternoon, El was taking her turn sweeping the kitchen when Hopper called out to her from the living room. "Hey El, can you come here please?"

She dropped the broom and hightailed it into the next room, hoping this would be her chance to finally ask about *the woman*.

"Yeah?" She asked, setting herself down on the coffee table in front of the couch where he was sitting.

Hopper looked away for a moment before looking back at her. "There's something I've been meaning to tell you..."

"I know, Dad."

He blinked in surprise. "You know?"

"About Will's mom? Yeah."

"Oh." He was silent for a few moments before chuckling. "Guess he told you, huh?"

El observed him. *He looks happier than I've ever seen him.* "Did you think he wouldn't? He didn't say you'd sworn him to secrecy."

At that Hopper laughed for real, and she started to laugh with him. She knew he'd been through a lot in his life, so seeing him this happy made her happy too. It was all she'd ever wanted for the wonderful man who'd taken her in at the most vulnerable time in her life and raised her to be someone she was proud of being. "I'm glad you're happy, Dad. And I know she's a great person, too."

He wiped his eyes, sparkling with mirth. "Thanks, Ellie. How's *Mike*?"  
He asked dramatically.

A goofy grin threatened to break her face. "He's great, I'm really happy. Also still not over the fact that he actually likes me back."

Hopper shrugged. "I told-"

"Oh, don't start with the *I told you so*, I knew there was a woman this whole time!"

Her dad looked at her before he stood and ruffled her hair. "I love you, kiddo."

"I love you, too, Dad."

"Now back to sweeping the kitchen with you!"

"Dad. Not cool."

"Sorry."

---

well hello! how do you feel after this chapter? pls lemme know how you think the kitchen scene was bc i'm very self-conscious of kissing scenes (it's only the second one i've written) but i liked it so tell me how you feel about it

QOTD: do you speak any languages besides english?

AOTD: yes, i speak portuguese! i know there's a lot of brazilian fans in this fandom so if you are one and want to leave a comment in portuguese instead worry not bc i will understand

thank you for reading!

## 11. The Revelation

hello it is i back with another update! in this chapter we see the return of emo mike because who doesn't love emo mike

jk i just like torturing my faves

hope you enjoy it! there's a shit ton of mileven today

---

"Michael! Jane's here!"

"Coming, Mom!"

Mike pressed a hand to the top of his head in a vain attempt to flatten his hair and frowned at himself in the mirror. He knew El could care less about his hair's efforts to ruin him, but he just always wanted to look good for her. Finally, he gave a frustrated sigh and flipped off his reflection before making his way down the stairs.

El was talking to his mom but she smiled when he came into the entryway. "Hey, beanpole, there you are," she said.

Mike saw his mom wrinkle her nose at the name, but he didn't think El had noticed. "Hey, half-pint, I thought I told you not to call me that."

"Is daddy long legs better?"

He rolled his eyes, reaching over to tug her away from his mom. "Bye, Mom, I'll see you later."

"Bye, Mrs. Wheeler!"

Outside, Mike dropped the car key and then smacked his head on the doorframe when he sat back up. "Jesus *fuck!*"

El laughed from the passenger side. "You okay there, Gigantor?"

He cut her a look. "You're a disgrace."

She smirked victoriously. "Says the one who hit his head on the ceiling."

Grumbling, Mike stuck the key in the ignition and pulled out of the driveway before grabbing ahold of El's hand and lacing his fingers with hers. At the first red light, he leaned over to place a kiss on her cheek, smiling. "You look really pretty."

She frowned, looking down at herself. "Mike, I'm wearing the same thing I usually wear." She was indeed, clad in rolled up jeans, a dark purple shirt, and a black jacket. The only thing she wore to offset the darkness were white Chucks.

"I know. I just always think you look pretty. You're beautiful, you know."

She hummed appreciatively. "Thanks, you goof. You're not so bad yourself. It's green, where are we going?"

"Ah, ah," he said, tapping his other hand on the steering wheel as he drove. "Not telling. You have to wait."

Twenty minutes later, they pulled up by a meadow. There wasn't anything particularly obvious about why he'd chosen this spot to bring El to.

El harrumphed. "I don't like surprises."

"We've been over this, El."

"Yes, and I don't like surprises."

"You'll like this one, I promise."

She looked out the window before turning back to him. "Does your family know yet?"

"About us?"

"Yeah."

Mike shook his head. "Only Holly, but I made her promise not to tell

anyone. Pretty sure my mom suspects it though, she's not stupid. She's just waiting for me to say something."

"No Dad?" El asked.

He snorted. "Like he'd care anyway."

"Mike-

"I don't want to talk about him."

"But-

He slammed his hands on the wheel, glowering. "I said I *don't* want to talk about him."

They sat in a thick silence until Mike got out of the car, taking a deep breath to calm himself before walking to the trunk to take out the picnic basket he'd packed. He looked up when he heard the door close, only to see El staring at him with a pained look on her face.

"I-

"I'm sorry," he interrupted. "I shouldn't have spoken to you like that, I'm being a dick."

She shook her head. "I shouldn't have pressed if you don't want to talk about it."

Mike sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Can we do this later? I just want to enjoy my time with you while the sun's still out."

She smiled a small smile, her features warming. "Sure."

---

The couple spent a good two hours eating the food Mike had packed and soaking up the late April sun. They might have kissed a few times (okay, a lot of times) but Mike was distracted. El's question had brought up the mountain of hurt he'd been trying to ignore for the last few days.

Ted Wheeler had never been the most interested father, and Mike

didn't know if it was his fault for being boring (but then again he'd never asked to be born). Ever since the arguments with his wife began (the year before Nancy went to college), the man had become even more disinterested in his children, except for when something not to his liking occurred.

This time, Mike had gotten a C+ on a precalculus test. Normally he was pretty good at anything involving numbers, although he was more of a natural with words. However, the unit the most recent test had been on had been particularly difficult and on top of that he'd been running on fumes the whole week. His parents had started arguing later at night, yelling Holly awake and scaring her into her brother's room. He had to stay up long enough to comfort her and make sure she went back to sleep, and then until their parents eventually stopped.

(Mike had found out early on that he couldn't sleep through the arguing.)

The problem then was that he *couldn't* fall asleep. His concern for Holly and mounting anger at what their parents were doing to her kept him awake. It would be two or three in the morning before he managed to succumb to the darkness, and he had to get up at seven to go through a whole day of school. Some days there was the addition of work, an added three or four hours spent at the movie theater making popcorn and drinks and sweeping the floors. By test day, Mike could say he was absolutely exhausted. He'd been quite literally struggling to keep his eyes open while writing the test, actually having to lay his head on the desk for a few moments to collect himself enough to answer questions.

His father didn't see it that way. Mike had gone home in low spirits, berating himself for the grade he'd gotten and wondering how his parents would take it. Needless to say, it hadn't gone well. At dinner he could tell that his mother was extra *on edge* and that her husband was well aware of it. If Holly had decided she wanted to try to cut the tension with her plastic knife, she could have, but Mike couldn't wait to tell them. It would be worse if he did.

So he went ahead, and just as he'd predicted, neither parent was happy about it. Karen was more disappointed than anything, but she



understood why this test hadn't gone as well and urged him to do better next time. Ted, on the other hand, blew up. He spent about five minutes hurling insults, making sure to drill into his son's head just how useless he was, until Mike excused himself from the table and locked himself in his room until morning.

The ensuing argument had been particularly loud that night, and Mike knew they were yelling about him even though their voices were muffled. He hadn't slept a wink, and it was these thoughts that were chasing him around as he lay in the meadow with El.

"El?" He said in a small voice, interrupting her long-winded rant about some stupid girls in her gym class.

"Yeah?" She asked, looking down. "Oh my god, are you okay?"

Apparently his feelings showed on his face because El immediately gathered him up into a hug, tucking his head under her chin and carding her fingers through his hair in what was obviously meant to be a calming gesture. All it did was make him start to cry faster.

He hated feeling like this. *There are people out there that have it a lot worse than you do*, he would tell himself. It was easy to pretend that what happened behind the closed doors of his house didn't affect him if he just focused on Holly, but he knew that at some point he was going to crack.

"Do you like me?" He asked, his tears soaking into the front of her shirt.

"What-"

"I just-" He let out a shuddering breath and pressed further into the crook between El's neck and shoulder, a choked gasp coming out of him. She hugged him closer and pressed a series of kisses to the top of his head.

"Let it out," she soothed. "Just let it all out."

Mike had never been more grateful for El's existence than right in that moment. Being in her arms gave him that sense of comfort he used to get from hugging his mother as a child, and she didn't even

need to say anything. After a few minutes, he felt like he could speak again.

"I'm sorry for crying on-"

"No, it's fine-"

"He just... makes me feel like absolute shit. My dad, I mean."

El stayed silent, waiting for him to continue.

"I got a C+ on that test, remember? Because I hadn't slept all week and the material was hard. I told them at dinner and my mom was kind of like 'it's okay, I get it, just do better next time' but my dad went off on me and I hid in my room the rest of the night."

El's hands paused in his hair. "So that ass of a man got mad at you for *one* mediocre grade? Is he even aware what the rest of your marks are like?"

Mike shook his head, feeling his throat close up again. "He doesn't *care*." He closed his eyes and paused to breathe and calm down. "I've done science fairs every year since fifth grade and won first four times, but I don't think he knows. And I've gotten some writing in the school newspaper and the Post as well. He doesn't give a single fuck about anything I do. He literally told me I was useless and I was never gonna find a job because I got a C+ on one fucking math test."

"You know that's not-"

Mike barrelled on, intent on finishing. "And I just wish I knew what the hell is wrong with me, why doesn't he like me? What did I *do*?" His voice cracked on the last word and he hid his face again.

El sighed above him. "Oh, baby, there's nothing wrong with you," she assured him, rubbing a hand on his back. "You're amazing and I don't want you to forget that just because your dad's an ass who's too blind to see it."

He sniffled. "I feel sometimes like everyone is a faker. My own dad doesn't like me, why would anyone else? I talk too much and I'm annoying and I'm too weak to do anything that needs physical work."

There's no reason to like me, anyway."

El leaned back, pushing him slightly away from her so she could look into his eyes. "There are so many reasons to like you that I can't even list them all. But: you're kind, you're humble, you're strong even though you don't think you are. Who's keeping things up for Holly in that house? It isn't your parents, I can say that for sure. You're smart, no matter what your dad says or what grades you get *one time*. You're a beautiful person inside and out."

She looked away for a moment and Mike blinked, feeling a bit lighter now that he'd confided his troubles in someone. He knew this wouldn't make the feelings go away, or the shitty situation itself disappear, but it was really, *really* nice to have someone he could lean on.

(He also knew that his friends would be there for him if he needed it, just like he would for them, but it was different with El. She understood him in a way nobody else could.)

El turned back, opening her mouth to speak again. "And maybe it's too soon for this, but you make me... feel things. Things I never knew I could feel. I don't know if I'm in love with you or anything, but I think I could be and that's... that takes a special person, you know? You're special."

Mike's vision went misty again, emotion overcoming him. "How do you always know exactly what to say to me?"

She looked directly at him, a sunny smile taking over her features once again. "I don't know. Maybe it's because my brain is Mike Central Station, I'm always thinking about you."

He laughed a watery laugh. "You're the best, El."

---

"I'm home!"

There was no answer as he walked into the house, which Mike found suspicious. *Where is my family?* He went upstairs and into the basement to investigate before concluding that his mom was

probably at the park with Holly and his dad was god knows where. It was a Sunday afternoon, after all. Shrugging, he turned into the kitchen to pick up the phone and dial his sister's number.

It rang four times before someone picked up, and it was decidedly *not* Nancy. "Goddamn it, Ben, I told you to stop calling! We broke up, leave me alone!"

"Um- I'm not Ben."

The girl on the other end sounded confused. "Sorry, my ex called about ten times right before you did. Who are you then?"

"Is Nancy there? It's her brother."

"Nancy! It's your brother!"

There was a pause and some shuffling on the other end of the line before another girl's voice was heard. "Mike?"

"Hey, Nance."

"What's up? Is everything okay?" She sounded curious.

Mike cleared his throat awkwardly. "Yeah, I guess. As well as things ever are around here."

"Mom and Dad still-"

"Yup."

She sighed frustratedly. "I wish they'd just divorce already, we all know it's coming sooner or later."

"I guess. Holly wakes up with them yelling all the time now and she comes to sleep with me instead."

Nancy was silent for a second. "I'm sorry I'm not coming home. I wish I could be there for you guys more but I can't stay in that house for long."

"It's fine, Nance, I wouldn't want you here either."

"That sounds like it should be offensive but I think I get what you mean," she laughed. "Sorry this got all depressing, this isn't why you called, is it?"

"How'd you know?"

"I may not live with you guys anymore, but I know my brother."

He smiled and leaned against the wall, twisting the phone cord around a finger. He knew she was in the exact same position, it was one of those random things that they did exactly the same. "I have something to tell you. I mean, I haven't told Mom or Dad yet, only Holly knows and I made her promise not to tell, but no one else is home so I figured I'd call."

Mike had a feeling Nancy was going to be able to guess it right away, and he just so happened to be correct in his prediction. "What, did you get a girlfriend or something?" She teased.

He didn't answer, and clearly heard the sharp intake of breath. "Oh my god, you did!"

He laughed. "Yeah, I did. Thought you might wanna know. Her name's El."

"That's a cool name."

"Actually her name's Jane, but to friends and family she's El."

"And what exactly are you?" Mike could hear the smirk in Nancy's voice.

"You know, I like to think I'm between friend and family," he retorted.

"That's really great Mike, I'm happy for you. My little brother has a girlfriend!"

He frowned. "I'm over six feet, you're the little one."

"But I'm twenty and will always be older than you."

"You know what, fuck you, Nancy."

They both laughed, only cut off by a loud clatter in the background on her side, followed by a litany of curse words. "I gotta go, Mike, Hannah just dropped a pot of macaroni on the floor. I look forward to meeting this El when I get back, I'll be there for the fourth of July. You better invite her."

"I mean, I was going to, but now that you said that I'm just going to exclude her specifically."

Nancy hung up without saying anything else after there was an ear piercing screech from who Mike presumed was her roommate Hannah, leaving him rolling his eyes at the phone.

It being a Sunday, Mike had already finished his homework that was due Monday on Saturday and that morning, so he had the rest of the afternoon and evening ahead of him. He decided he was going to get a head start on the lasagna his mom had said she was going to make, and so it was that half an hour later Karen and Holly returned home to Mike putting the tray in the oven, shutting the door with a self-satisfied smile.

"Michael?"

"Oh, hey, Mom," he said, casually turning to the sink to start washing the utensils he'd used. "I thought I'd get started on the lasagna for dinner."

She hung up her jacket and bent down to take off Holly's shoes. "That's very nice of you. You're in a good mood, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I'm feeling better than I have the past few days. It was a good afternoon."

Holly clapped. "Is it because of El?"

Mike cut her a look. "And who told you that, Princess Holly?"

She turned to their mother, who had a smile on her face. "It was."

He held his dripping hands up. "Alright, yeah, you got me. It was

because of El. Speaking of her... Mom, I, um- I wanted to tell you something."

His mother looked expectantly back at him, but he was sure she already knew what was coming. "Uh, she's- we're dating."

She simply nodded. "I know."

"You do?"

"Well, I could guess, from the way you talk about her."

Mike rubbed the back of his neck nervously and flinched, forgetting that his hands were wet. "I'm that obvious, huh?"

Holly was standing in the entrance to the kitchen with a big grin. "You're very obvious!"

Karen nodded. "You should invite her for dinner. How does tomorrow work?"

He released a breath, letting out the small build-up of tension in his body. "Sounds great, I'll ask her."

---

The dinner went well, other than El completely ignoring Ted at the table. Now that he'd officially introduced her to his family as his girlfriend, Mike could focus on Operation Get Maxtin Together (and finals, too, of course). The entire group (sans Max and Dustin) had met after school in the AV room one day to plan out the whole thing. That Friday, they were all going to ditch lunch, leaving the two in question alone together. Hopefully, it would start something. After that, they'd collectively agreed to start leaving them alone together more often in the hopes that one of them would eventually confess.

"Alright, so just to confirm, I'll be in the art room working on something, Mike and El, you guys are somewhere making out or whatever it is you guys do-"

"Hey!"

"And Lucas, you will be?"

Lucas rolled his eyes. "I still think this is stupid."

"Dude."

He relented. "I'll be in the library working on an assignment."

"Great!" Will clapped his hands, pleased. "I hope this works."

Turns out, Mike and El *did* go somewhere to make out, that somewhere being behind the gym. They almost got caught by a teacher as well, but they managed to get away just in time.

"That was close," panted Mike, winded after running for all of six seconds. They'd taken to making use of whatever opportunities they were given, the need to kiss each other and explore what made them feel so good almost overwhelming.

El laughed. "You'd think that with those long legs you'd be able to keep up, you ostrich."

Mike looked up at her from where he was bent over, heaving for breath. "What is *with* these ugly nicknames? I don't like this."

"Oh shut up, you love it," she retorted.

"This is abuse!" He exclaimed.

"Abuse of what? My creativity?"

"More like your... I don't even know where I was going with this."

El smiled again, and Mike wasn't sure if she knew just how that smile lit up his whole world. In that moment, it hit him: *I'm pretty sure I'm in love.*

---

how do we feel about this? please let me know how you liked this chapter!

QOTD: i don't have one today, but ask me something you want to ask me! whether it be about something like why is my username what it is or about something else, go ahead! i love questions :D



## 12. The Fight

sorry for the long wait, peeps! school is a bitch and so is my mental health! this chapter is completely unedited so sorry if it's trash,,,,,, i don't really like this one either,,,,,,,,,

---

She should have known something like this was going to happen. In fact, she *had* known: Mike had been set off by the smallest things lately, and when he'd shown up at her door that morning his usual mildly irritated expression had morphed into an angry scowl.

She knew it probably had something to do with either one or both of his parents, but she couldn't help but blame herself, too. The entire morning had gone more or less like this:

"El."

"Yeah?"

"Stop. That."

"Sorry."

First it had been her breathing, then she'd been chewing on her pen and tapping it on the table, and after that it had been a multitude of regular house noises that had him glaring into the shadows.

"Mike?"

"What."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he'd said, but he was seething. He broke the tip off his pencil a bunch of times and the way he was punching numbers into his calculator was... aggressive, to say the least. She should have known, but she wasn't expecting it to end like it did.

It was mid-afternoon and El was hungry, so she decided to leave her English for a bit and make her favourite dessert: Eggo Extravaganza.

The waffles were in the toaster and she was getting whipped cream out of the fridge when things started to go wrong. The Eggos popped out when she was right in front of the toaster, scaring her for a moment and causing her to drop the whipped cream can in her hand to the floor with a clang. Behind her, at the table, El heard Mike take a very deep breath and let it out slowly. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his knuckles whitening as he gripped his pencil hard.

"Sorry," she said quickly, hoping to defuse the tension in the room. Next, she dropped a plate as she was getting it out of the cupboard and it broke on the floor. Mike looked up sharply as El bent to grab the larger pieces.

"Gotta be kidding me," he groaned frustratedly. "Do you need help with that?"

El shook her head quickly, walking over to the door to grab the broom and sweep up the small pieces. "I got it, it's fine."

Mike turned back to his work with no further comment. A few minutes later and she drew the last straw: she'd placed the Eggos on plates on the table and was about to lather on the whipped cream, but when she went to do that it sprayed all over. Luckily it didn't land on any textbooks, but Mike still slammed his shut and stood from the table.

Angrily, he shoved his stuff into his bag and started walking to the door, leaving El standing in front of the table with a sinking stomach. "Mike, what- where are you going?"

"I'm leaving," he answered, forcing his feet into his shoes. "I can't do this."

El rushed over, grasping his arm as he reached for the door. "What-no, we're not- why are you leaving?!"

"Because I can't be here!" He exploded. "This isn't working!"

*Well shit*, El thought. She was finding it a little hard to breathe. "What's not working?"

"This!" He said, gesturing between them before quickly shrugging her

hand off and opening the door.

El stood in her front doorway struggling to find words. Mike was almost peeling off into the street when she called out. "Don't leave, please! We don't have to eat the Eggos!"

He looked back at her, eyes flashing. "Just leave me alone, okay?! Just *leave me alone*." And he left.

She stood on the stoop for another fifteen minutes, hoping Mike would come back. She didn't know what had made him so angry. She didn't think her kitchen mishaps would be enough to suddenly make her boyfriend (*is that even what he is, anymore?*) want to leave and have her leave him alone. Back in the kitchen, El picked up a cloth and started methodically wiping down the table, removing the accidentally sprayed whipped cream and trying not to think too hard about whatever the fuck had just happened.

She ate half a waffle before feeling like she couldn't continue. Her throat was too dry and she felt like she was choking on the lump in it. "Okay," she said to herself, trying to ignore the burning in her eyes. "I'm not going to cry over some dumb *boy*. I'm going to study, and I'm going to do it now."

---

Her resolve was pretty strong, actually. Or maybe it was just denial. She went at least an hour staring at her English notes and convincing herself she was reading them before giving up and looking at her hands instead. El didn't realize she was crying until a tear dripped onto the page in front of her, at which point she decided to give in to her feelings.

She pressed the heels of her palms into her eyes, hoping to put a dam on the tears, but it seemed that only made them come faster. She felt so stupid for crying about it, knowing full well that none of it was her fault and that if anything, she should be the one angry at Mike for acting the way he had. But she wasn't, she was just upset that clearly something was bothering him quite a whole lot and he hadn't told her about it. Instead he'd just taken out his anger on her.

*Are we over?* He'd said "this" wasn't working, making it sound like he

meant their entire relationship. Her chest felt like it was about to break open. She didn't want it to be over. They'd only been dating for a bit over a month, but already Mike was her favourite person. He made her feel special in a way nobody else had ever been able to. Granted, he was also only her first boyfriend, and maybe if she'd had others before him she might've had a better scale to work with in terms of judging her emotions. But that didn't make them mean any less, and that was why she was so upset.

Sniffling, El stood from the table and made her way to the phone hanging on the wall, dialling the number she knew by heart.

"Hello?"

She breathed a sigh of relief that the person she wanted had picked up on the first try. "Hi, Maxie."

"Hey, El! Aren't you supposed to be studying?" Max sounded relieved, like she'd been sitting around all day waiting to have a legitimate excuse not to do her work.

"Yeah, I guess..."

"What, your lousy boyfriend too distracting yet still boring enough to make you have to call me instead?" El could hear the smirk in Max's voice and it made her want to smile, but the mention of Mike made her face crumple instead.

"No, he- he left."

Max hummed. "Why?" There was a pause, in which Max heard a sniffle from El's end. "Ellie, are you crying?"

"No, I-"

"What did he *do*? I like Wheeler just fine, but I swear I'll beat his ass!"

"Don't- don't do that," El protested weakly. "He just- I don't know if it was a fight? He got mad and he left, but he was mad at *everything* all day."

Max huffed. "El-"

"And he's been touchy lately, did you notice?"

"Not really, I don't pay much attention to him."

"Well, that helps my case."

Max huffed again. "So he's mad, but you didn't do anything wrong? Let him cool off for a bit and he'll come crawling back. Dude's in love with you and boys are so dumb."

El felt a pang in her heart at her best friend's words. "No, he's not," she answered. "I- he said something, before he left. And now I'm not sure if- if we're still even dating?"

"*What?! What did he say?*"

"He said- he said he couldn't be here and that this wasn't working, and I asked what wasn't working and he said this and kind of pointed between us. What does that mean?! Maxie, I don't want us to be broken up!" A surge of panic washed over her as she spoke.

"Hey, hey, calm down," Max said quickly. "That sounds like he's just being his usual drama queen self, and add that temper to it? I don't think he meant he wanted to break up."

El took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart. She'd thought talking to Max might help, but she felt like she was on a literal rollercoaster of emotions. "You think so?"

"Pssh, I know so. Like I said, he's so far gone beyond whipped that he'd never break up with you unless something was seriously wrong. Even then."

"Thanks, Max," El said, letting out a watery laugh.

"Do you want me to come over? Some girl time?"

El shook her head before remembering Max couldn't see her. "That would be nice, but we both need to study and I think I want to be alone for a bit anyway. My dad will be home in a few hours."

"Okay, but call me again if you need anything."

"You know I will. I love you, Max."

"Aw, love you too, Ellie."

---

When Hopper got home, the lights were all off and there was a sandwich on a plate in the kitchen for him. "El?" He called.

There was a muffled response. "I'm outside!"

She was sitting on the back porch, looking up at the stars, when she felt the weight of her dad sink down next to her. He didn't say anything for a few minutes, just sat there eating his sandwich.

Finally, he broke the silence. "You okay, kid? You seem a little off."

El lay her head on his shoulder and sighed. "I'm okay, I think. Could be better."

"You wanna tell me what happened?"

She shook her head. "Not really."

Hopper reached up and ruffled her hair. "You know you can talk to me."

"I know, Dad. Thanks."

He didn't say anything else after that, but it was nice to know he was there. Hopper was a big man and he looked kind of intimidating if you didn't know him, which El supposed was great for his job, but she knew that on the inside he was just a big ol' softie. He was good at knowing what to say to her, and sometimes she felt like she wasn't ever going to be grateful enough that he existed.

"How's Mrs. Byers?"

Hopper wrinkled his nose. "That makes it sound like she's still married."

"Well, what am I supposed to call her?"

He rubbed his eyes. "Joyce'll do fine. She wants to meet you, you know."

El's eyes widened and a smile broke across her face for the first time in hours. "Really?"

"Yeah," Hopper laughed. "Says you'll be like the daughter she never had."

El grinned at the sky before looking at her dad. "I want to meet her! Will's great, so I'm sure his mom is too."

Hopper smiled back, a rare occurrence. His eyes sparkled. "She's really great. I think you'll like each other."

"I hope so." She looked back up at the stars and felt Hopper's arm go around her shoulders, pulling her closer.

"You ready for finals?" He asked.

El shrugged. "I guess. I have to be."

Hopper laughed again. El's eyebrows raised. "You are in a *really* good mood," she said dryly.

"I am."

"I'm glad you're happy, Dad. You deserve it."

He sighed. "It's nice, after so long... I still miss her, every day."

"Sara?"

Hopper nodded, looking at his feet and then squinting towards the stars. "She loved space, you know. All that science shit. Knew the name of every constellation, every planet. Told me she wanted to be an astronaut when she grew up."

El looked at the sky again. "It sucks she didn't get to, she would've been an amazing astronaut. And a female one, too."

He grunted. "That's why I always want you to follow your dreams,

kid. Sara didn't get to and you almost didn't either, so I'm going to make sure you get that chance."

Getting up and stretching, Hopper headed toward the door. "You comin' inside?"

"In a minute."

He went inside, shutting the door and leaving El outside again. It was nice when Hopper got to be open with her like this, it made her feel like he wasn't just her dad but also someone she could confide in and trust. Things were hard for her for a while after her mother's death, but having him there to take care of her had worked wonders. Jim Hopper was El's guardian angel, in a way. It only made her love him more.

Sighing, she stood up to make her way inside. Tomorrow was a new day with new challenges to face, and she needed sleep if she was going to deal with them.



## 13. The Waffles

what's up dear readers, it is i, urdearestmom! first and foremost i would like to make an apology for how long it took me to update this because fuck,, it's been over a month

i lost all motivation for it and i really didn't like last chapter anyway :/ i've also been busy packing stuff up because my family is moving and since i'm out of school right now and don't have a job i've been the one doing basically all the packing

HOWEVER i think i have my mojo back and hopefully i will be able to update again soon! we're in the final stretch kids only four more chapters to go after this :)

enjoy!

---

Mike knew he was being stupid. He knew he was overreacting and being an asshole and that he should turn right around and go apologize to his girlfriend as soon as he left. But he couldn't make himself do it. *She probably doesn't want anything to do with you anymore*, he thought bitterly. *Who would?*

When he got home he stormed up to his room, ignoring his mother calling his name, and slammed the door shut. "Can't fail this *fucking* exam," he grumbled, staring at the offending precalc textbook in front of him. His father would probably disown him, or something, if he did.

It was with this bitterness and anger stewing in him that Mike tried to continue the studying he'd started at El's house. The final in question wouldn't be for another three days, but after the last test he'd had Mike really couldn't afford to do poorly and he was on his last thread with everything in general.

He "studied" until his mom called him down for dinner, but half the time he kept thinking back to what he'd said to El and yelling at himself for being such a fucking idiot. Before leaving the relative safety of his room, Mike took a deep breath and closed his eyes. *I am*

*going to call her tomorrow when I have a clear head and apologize. She probably doesn't want to talk to me right now anyway, I should give her space. Okay.* He opened his eyes and stared at the wall in front of him for a second before releasing the breath he was holding and standing up to make his way downstairs.

Dinner was tense as usual, the only conversation taking place being Mike asking Holly if she liked her peas and their mother telling her that she had to eat them whether she liked them or not (she did). After dinner was when things came to a head. His dad was already asleep in the La-Z-Boy and Holly was watching the Disney channel next to him while Mike pushed in the chairs in the dining room. He was about to escape to the bathroom when the phone rang and his stomach sank into his toes. It was an irrational fear but- what if El was calling to tell him he was too much of an ass and she was breaking up with him?

"Michael, can you get that?" His mom, of course, was elbow-deep in dishwater, leaving him to answer the phone himself.

"Hello?"

"Great, just who I wanted. I'll make this quick."

He furrowed his brows. "Max?"

"Yeah, it's me, dipshit." Mike had a feeling he knew what this was about. "Literally what the fuck, you asshole. She was crying and El does *not* cry. You'd better fix this or I will skin you alive."

She didn't even allow him time to respond before she hung up. "God," he groaned, stepping to the side to lean over the counter with his head in his hands. He could feel his mom staring at him but he couldn't bring himself to look back at her. *Ellie was crying? What kind of shitty boyfriend am I. Who does that? What am I even going to do now, this is worse than I thought...*

A few moments later a hand squeezed his shoulder and Mike looked up to see his mom gazing concernedly at him. "What's wrong, honey?" She asked.

"Nothing," was his reflexive answer, the word coming out of his mouth without thought. He never really talked about his problems to his parents. He felt like they weren't exactly receptive. Or well... his mom tried, at least. Her face right now was telling him that she was seeing right through his bullshit.

"You can talk to me, Mike," she pleaded. "I'm right here for you."

And for once, Mike decided that maybe he should take the plunge. Maybe talking to his mom would give him a modicum of relief from all his emotions. Wrapping his arms around her, he lay his head on his mom's shoulder and she petted his hair just like she used to when he was a kid. "I was a jerk to El earlier and I figured I would just call tomorrow to apologize when I'm calmed down," he said. It came out muffled into his mother's dress sleeve. "But Max just called to yell at me and she told me El was crying because of what I said to her."

"Oh, honey..."

"And now I don't know what to do because I really hurt her and I was so stupid and I don't know how to apologize!" He didn't want to, but after that admission the guilt that had been creeping up on him since leaving El's house that afternoon crashed down on him and Mike let a few tears slip out. He hoped his mom wouldn't notice, but she hugged him a little tighter.

"It's alright, sweetie, just let it out," she said quietly, pressing her cheek to the top of his head. "I know things are hard for you and your father and I don't make it any easier. I'm sorry. I wish it were better."

"Me too," he answered in a small voice. "I want things to go back to the way they were."

His mom only sighed. They stood that way for a little while more before Mike pulled back and stood straight. "Thanks, Mom," he croaked, wiping his nose. Nothing had really gone away, but confiding in his mother had definitely made things feel a little less overwhelming.

"Do you feel any better?" She asked, eyes searching his face.

He nodded. "A little. But I still have to apologize for being such a- a-mouthbreather."

It was silent in the kitchen for a moment before- "You're about to have an idea," said Karen.

Mike frowned at his mom. "What?"

She smiled softly. "I know my son and he is about to have an idea."

A second later, an idea *did* occur to him. "Is Melvald's still open?"

"Until midnight."

"Thanks!" Mike rushed off upstairs to grab his wallet out of his backpack before hightailing it out the front door, stopping in the kitchen again to snatch the car keys from his mother's waiting fingers.

Upon arriving at said store, Mike saw that there were two cars parked out front, one of which he recognized: Will's mom's Pinto. Walking in, he looked around, but the only cashier was some random kid he thought he might know from school. Not seeing Joyce Byers anywhere, Mike decided he'd get on with his shopping. A few minutes later he was in aisle seven looking for Hershey's Kisses when he heard a soft voice.

"Mike?"

"Oh, hey, Mrs. Byers," he answered, turning around to see the short brown-haired woman he thought of as a second mother. "Just looking for some chocolate." He was trying to play it cool, as if he was buying chocolate for no reason other than simply wanting it. He thought she bought it.

"What kind are you looking for?" She asked with a kind smile.

"Hershey's Kisses," he said, eyes roving the shelves, "and M&Ms." Looking toward Joyce, Mike cocked an eyebrow. "Do you sell whipped cream?"

---

The next morning Mike forced himself out of bed at the ungodly hour of eight, which was the exact opposite of what he wanted to do (not being a morning person in the slightest), but it was a way to punish himself for being such a dickhead the day before. And he knew El was a morning person, so he needed to wake up early enough to catch her before she ate breakfast.

Fortunately, he was out of his house and on the way to hers with his creations sitting in a Tupperware on the seat next to him before nine. When he got there, he felt a jolt of panic at the sight of the Hawkins Police cruiser parked out front.

"How did I forget about Hopper?" He groaned to himself. "Probably wants to kill me or arrest me by now. Fuck."

Nevertheless, a glance at the house Mike knew contained the only person he wanted to talk to right then was enough to steel his nerves, so he made his way to the front door with purpose. He knocked and waited until the door swung open to reveal a mostly-uniformed Hopper. He was affixing his badge to his shirt. *Huh, guess he's going to work, then.*

"Hey, kid," he said, with that Hopper half-smile on his face. "What are you doing here this early on a Sunday?"

Mike balked at his amiable tone. It seemed like Hopper was in a good mood! *Shit, El must not have told him...* He cleared his throat awkwardly and shuffled his feet while staring at a point somewhere on Hopper's forehead. "I, um. I'm here to apologize, if El will let me talk to her."

Hopper's eyes narrowed and his moustache twitched in a way that Mike thought might be interpreted as threatening. "So you're the reason she was upset last night, huh?"

Mike swallowed and tried to explain. "I was in a terrible mood yesterday and I got mad at her for no reason. She didn't deserve that or any of what I said to her so I'd like to tell her that I'm sorry if she'll let." He was gripping his Tupperware so tightly he thought he might actually break it, even though it was made of plastic.

Hopper grumbled but stepped aside and closed the door behind Mike as he entered. He was just standing there awkwardly with an arms-crossed police officer behind him when El entered the entry from the kitchen.

She was in pyjamas with her hair up and Mike was almost struck dizzy with how much he suddenly felt like he needed to see her like that *all the time* (*Is that too soon? That's too soon.*). She was beautiful as always, but she looked tired and upset.

*I did that*, Mike thought sadly. Out loud, he simply held out his Tupperware and said, "Waffles?"

He wasn't ready for El's lips to wobble and then for her to throw herself at him, hugging him tightly. He almost dropped the Eggos he was holding but he wrapped his arms around her as best he could, pressing his face into her hair and whispering his apologies.

A few moments later, she pulled away with a bright, if watery, smile. "Did you make Eggo Extravaganzas?"

"I *tried*."

Behind them, Hopper cleared his throat pointedly. Mike jumped. "You two alright now?" He asked.

Mike looked to El for confirmation that everything was indeed alright between them and she simply nodded before intertwining her hand with his free one.

Hopper barked a laugh before putting his hat on. "Jesus, you're so stupidly in love you don't even know how to stay mad at each other. I'm off, no funny business, y'hear?"

The couple had turned beet red and didn't answer as they watched Hopper get into the Blazer and drive away.

After a second of silence, El shut the door and took the Tupperware Mike was still holding. "Breakfast, huh? Come on."

They were half done the (fairly good) Eggo Extravaganzas Mike had made when he spoke again. "I really am sorry about yesterday, I was

such an ass."

El's fork paused inside the Tupperware as she looked across at him. "I know you're going through stuff right now and you already apologized. I was never mad, Mike. You're forgiven."

He sighed. "I just- get mad really easily and I shouldn't have taken it out on you. Hey," he joked, "maybe I should take some anger management classes or something."

El rolled her eyes. "I don't think you're at that level, stop being so dramatic."

"But I thought you loved my drama?"

"Dork."

---

The rest of the day was spent watching movies and trashy TV and doing magazine quizzes. Usually things considered typically girly, but Mike didn't mind what he was doing as long as he got to do it with El. At one point, on her insistence that he had nice nails, Mike let El paint his nails black. He actually kind of liked how they looked, the black was quite striking in contrast to his pale skin tone. In return, she let him paint hers purple. He was doing a pretty good job too before he knocked over the bottle of acetone on the coffee table, but luckily the cap was screwed on tight.

When he left, it was with a long, breath-stealing kiss to her lips, his hands cradling her head. He leaned his forehead against hers for a moment and looked into her eyes, the familiar warmth that pooled everywhere inside him every time he looked at her settling in again.

El had closed the door with a smile after Mike got into the car, so he stared at the offending piece of wood and thought about his *I love you* that had gone unsaid.

---

lemme know what you think of this chapter! i quite liked it :)

QOTD: would you be interested in reading a sequel of this because i had this really lit idea that i want to write

AOTD: i mean i'd be the one writing it so,,,,, comment!



## 14. The Feelings

why hello my lovely readers! what is this, you ask? an update? wow! jk it's been like two weeks this time? something like that

anyway there's a lot of mileven in this chapter so i hope you guys aren't getting tired of them yet. minor party interactions also, plus a bonus holly! anyway i'll stop with the spoilers and let you guys get on with your reading :)

---

Fast-forward to a hot day in late June: the Party were lounging by the shore of Lake Jordan, drying off after spending a good chunk of the day in the water. It was one of those days where it was so hot that the heat was visible rising off the blacktop, the weather staying consistent with that year's drought. Most of the United States was experiencing it but the Midwest had also seen dust storms, unlike anything dating back to the Dust Bowl in the 30s.

Dustin and Lucas were wrestling in the sand as Will looked on amusedly, while Mike and Max were trying to find a spot to sit in that was shady enough to protect their fair skin until they reapplied sunscreen. El decided to follow because the sun was so hot that even though she might not burn so easily, she'd rather avoid standing in it if she could. It just felt like a smart precaution.

Max smeared sunscreen all over herself and got El to rub it in, excited to get back into the sun and tear up the sand with Dustin and Lucas. El just laughed as she finished and the redhead ran away, yelling profanity at the boys on the ground.

She turned around when something tapped her shoulder, smiling when she saw that it was Mike with the bottle of sunscreen. "Do me and I'll do you?" He asked with a crooked grin.

El gave an exaggerated gasp and smacked his bare chest playfully. "You *dog!*"

He started to laugh at his innuendo and El shoved him into a sitting position as she crouched behind him so she could get his back. She

thought his laugh was the cutest sound in the world; it was squeaky and throaty at the same time and it kind of made him sound like a thirteen-year-old boy whose voice had just started deepening, but well. She'd liked thirteen-year-old Mike a whole lot.

"Stop laughing!" She exclaimed, a giant smile on her face. "That was a terrible joke and you know it."

"Ah, but you loved it and you know it," he replied smugly.

*I love you too*, she thought, but she didn't vocalize it. It was something she'd been thinking about a lot recently, recently being every time she looked at her boyfriend for the past month and a half. She didn't know when the right time to say it would be, and she was worried that he didn't feel that strongly for her. She didn't want to tell Mike she was in love with him and then leave him to consider the weight of her feelings when he wasn't in love with her back. That would *suck*. So El just bided her time.

After their "fight", things had been good. Finals had gone swimmingly and Max and Dustin seemed blissfully oblivious to the fact that their friends kept leaving them alone. Mike's parents seemed to be doing a little better, according to him, although he was also sure they'd never be back to what they used to be. In even happier news, Max's mom and stepdad had gone on vacation for two weeks, leaving Max with their house to herself. What was even better than that was that the girl had made the decision to move out as soon as she turned eighteen, which would be just after school started in September. Hopper had offered her their spare room and El couldn't be more ecstatic to have her best friend living with them. She was getting out of her horrible home environment, *finally*, and coming to live with her sister in everything but blood. What was there not to like about the arrangement?

El squeezed a blob of sunscreen out of the bottle and onto Mike's back.

"Fuck!" He hissed. "That's cold!"

She smirked as she rubbed it across his shoulder blades. "Karma for making that stupid joke."

He grumbled but ultimately didn't respond. A few minutes later, when Mike was standing behind her and doing her back, El had a thought. "You know what we should do this summer? Go to an amusement park."

Mike hummed in assent. "I haven't been since I was little."

El shrugged. "I've never been."

"Really?! You're gonna have so much fun."

Their friends agreed, and so it was settled. A week later, bright and early on a wonderful Tuesday morning where no one had to work, Will picked up El, Max, and Dustin using the old car his brother had passed down to him and took them all over to the Maple Street cul de sac to meet Mike and Lucas.

El was going to switch to ride with Mike and the rest of the group were going with Will because no one wanted to be stuck with "the gross couple", so upon arriving she skipped out of the car and over to the front of the Wheeler house, where Mike was leaning against the trunk of the station wagon looking unfairly attractive. The buttons on his polo were undone, revealing some of the pale skin of his chest.

(It threw her back to the week before when they'd been swimming at the lake. When Mike had taken his shirt off El had been unable to keep from staring. He didn't have *any* definition whatsoever, but the way his torso sloped gently into his hips was absolutely delicious. And that thin trail of hair that disappeared into his swim trunks... *well*. El could be certain that she'd never been more physically attracted to someone than in that moment.)

"Why, hello, my handsome giant!" She called.

He rolled his eyes and opened his arms for the usual greeting hug and kiss, giving Dustin the finger when he yelled, "Get a room!" out the car window. "Hello, my beautiful shortcake! To what do I owe this pleasure?"

El wrinkled her nose in a laugh. "These nicknames are just terrible."

"You started them!" Mike protested, before adding, "You ready to go?"

She hadn't been able to answer when a golden streak escaped out the front door with a shriek. "Don't leave without me, Mikey!"

Mike groaned and covered his eyes. "I thought Mom was taking you out today," he said to Holly, who had stopped by the side of the car with flushed cheeks and bright eyes and carried a sparkly blue backpack.

She shook her head violently. "Mommy said I could come with you if I want. Please, please, *please*?"

He pointed his gaze skyward to avoid looking at the small blonde and El had to cover her mouth to avoid a giggle. She already knew what his answer would be.

"Do you have your inhaler?" Holly nodded enthusiastically. Mike sighed. "Then I guess you can come."

The little girl squealed and threw her arms around her brother's waist. "Thank you! I love you!"

At that El had to smile. Holly was just too cute.

"I love you too, but if you want to go you have to get into the car now." Holly was strapping in to her seat in a second, her excitement plainly visible. El and Mike turned to their friends to find them watching.

"Is little Wheeler coming too or are you dropping her off somewhere?" Called Max.

"She's coming," Mike answered. "Hope you guys don't mind."

They didn't, because Holly was impossible not to adore, and so everyone was on their way. They were headed to Holiday World in Santa Claus, about two and half hours south. It was "the first theme park in America", apparently, and El was just as excited as, if not more than, Holly.

They'd been on the road for about forty-five minutes, El mostly making conversation with Holly in the back so Mike could stay focused on driving, when Holly's face lit up at the opening of a song.

Her brother turned up the volume without her asking and she started to sing along. She actually sang most of the words correctly, something that surprised El, but then again Holly was eight and not three. The thing that surprised her most was when Mike joined in at the chorus. She whipped around to look at him and found him grinning out the windshield.

*"And I can't fight this feeling anymore! I've forgotten what I started fighting for! It's time to bring this ship into the shore, and throw away the oars, forever!"*

It was almost like he knew exactly what she was feeling every time she thought about him. The word *soulmate* flitted across El's mind as an infectious grin spread across her face.

*"Cause I can't fight this feeling anymore! I've forgotten what I started fighting for! And if I have to crawl upon the floor, come crashing through your door, baby, I can't fight this feeling anymore..."*

The three of them belted out the lyrics to REO Speedwagon's Can't Fight This Feeling Anymore as the car raced down the interstate after Will's. When it ended, Mike turned the volume back down and Holly clapped her hands.

"You're such a good singer, El!" The young girl exclaimed, a radiant smile on her little face.

El saw Mike throw her a warm look before turning back to the road. "El's just awesome at everything, isn't she, Hol?"

"Yeah! She's awesome like Nancy. Can you be my sister too, El?"

El was thrown off-guard for a second because the only way she'd be Holly's sister would be to marry Mike, but she figured Holly didn't have to know that. "Sure I can be your sister, Holly. I've always wanted a little sister and you're the best little sister of them all!"

Holly beamed. "That means you're gonna get married to Mike, right?"

*Good lord.* Sometimes El forgot that little kids were more astute than older people gave them credit for. She looked to Mike for an answer and saw that he was blushing. Even the tips of his ears, sticking out

of his hair, were pink. El cleared her throat awkwardly. "Um, yeah, I guess. You wouldn't mind that, would you, Mike?"

"Not at all!" He said in a rush, turning even pinker as he spoke. His voice cracked at the end which made Holly start laughing, and in turn made Mike and El laugh too and dissipated the sudden tension as quickly as it had come.

---

Overall, it was one of the most fun days El had ever experienced in her life, but the highlight absolutely had to be when Mike slipped. The group had just gotten hot dogs about halfway through their day and were walking towards a setup of picnic tables to sit down, but Mike didn't notice the muddy bit in the grass that everyone else had avoided. Unfortunately for the seat of his pants, he slipped and fell directly on his ass, dropping his lunch in the process. Everyone else burst into laughter, the near-shrieks coming from Holly mixing with Dustin's deep bellows. Mike had gotten up with an angry huff before stalking away to buy another hot dog, ignoring the mirth on his friends' faces when he returned.

El had to try very hard to keep her giggles in because every time she looked at him, she replayed the image of him falling and it was just about the funniest thing ever. *I'm head over heels for this dork.*

Other than that, the rest of the day had gone absolutely amazing (although to El, Mike's literal slip-up only added to the amazing-ness of it all). She got to experience roller coasters and some other stuff as well as spend quality time with some of her favourite people. Holly was also a sweetheart the whole day, and spending time with the littlest Wheeler was always a blast.

On the way home, the sun was setting, coming in through the driver's side window and setting Mike's face aglow. It reminded El of when he'd driven her home after her first dinner at his house, when the moon had shone through the windshield and illuminated his features in a breathtaking way. It was the first time she'd really admitted to herself she might be falling just the *tiniest* bit in love with him, and now that she was looking at him the same way again she knew she was falling *a lot* in love with him.

"Is Holly asleep?"

Mike's voice broke El out of her thoughts and she turned to see that Holly was indeed fast asleep in the backseat. "Yup."

He smiled without turning to look at her. "Nice. Did you notice Dustin and Max shared ice cream today?"

El leaned back in her seat and let out a whoosh of breath in excitement. "I did! Seems our plans are working."

"Hopefully they don't ignore the signs."

"What?"

"I mean-" said Mike, waving his right hand, "I hope they're not as dumb as me. 'Cause I kept overthinking stuff you did and trying to convince myself you didn't like me. We could've been together earlier if only I wasn't such an idiot."

El rolled her eyes. "Well, it ended up working out for you anyway, didn't it?"

He took her hand and started to run his thumb over the side of it, keeping his left on the steering wheel. "It did."

The rest of the ride was quiet, but El basked in the soft type of silence that it was. It was a warm summer's night and the air was thick with unnamable emotion. She just felt happy, and she was glad to have people around her that made her that way.

As she got out in front of her house, Mike leaned out the window. "Hey, I forgot earlier, but you're invited to my parents' Fourth of July party!"

She grinned. "Yeah?"

"Definitely. I'm gonna call Max, probably, but if you get to her first invite her, too," he added.

"Okay."

"Okay."

Twin grins shone in the twilight. "I- never mind," El started. "Have a good night."

"You too. Now I gotta get this one home," Mike answered, hooking a thumb in the still-sleeping Holly's direction.

"You do that," El replied, leaning down to place a quick kiss on Mike's lips before turning and dashing up to the porch. He waved as he left.

She raised a hand to her mouth and watched the red of the taillights disappear before her lipscurved back into a smile. Her heart pounded against her ribs like it was trying to escape. "I love you," she said to the air, hoping one day she'd have the courage to utter the words to his face.

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how did you like it? lemme know down below (yeeT THAT RHYMES)

QOTD: have you hmu on tumblr?

AOTD: i have indeed hit myself up on tumblr, but in case you haven't, i'm urdearestmom and i post about ST, IT, and TGF :)



## 15. The Party

hey guys it's me! i'm back with a new chapter it has been another while! the move made things hectic but it's calmed down now so it should be fine. hope you enjoy :)

---

"*Michael!*"

Mike groaned and turned over, promptly falling out of his bed. This was the third time his mom had called him in the last ten minutes and he knew he was going to get in trouble if he wasn't downstairs soon, but *come on*. It was eight in the goddamn morning on a *holiday*. He already woke up at eight four days a week for work, he didn't need to do it on a holiday.

So, ignoring his mother and risking her wrath, Mike tugged his pillow onto the floor with him. He got about five more minutes of peace before he heard footsteps and his sister opening the door.

"Get up before- why are you on the floor?"

"I'm living my best life."

He hadn't opened his to see her, but he knew in his soul that Nancy was rolling her eyes. "I think you'd rather I wake you than let Mom get up here."

He made an unintelligible sound. "I'm tired."

"Yeah, well, we all know Dad isn't going to do shit setting up, so we need your help," she retorted.

"But does it have to be this *early*?"

Against every instinct, Mike was sitting at the dinner table squinting at his breakfast in less than ten minutes, his mother looking pleased to finally have him show his face.

"I'm going to need you to set up the tables and put up decorations, honey, okay? You're the tallest," she was saying, watching as he

poured syrup on his eggs.

"Sure," he offered, it still being too early for him to formulate many words.

After breakfast Mike took a shower, coming out of it feeling much more refreshed and ready to take on the day. He put on a vertically-striped yellow button-up he found hanging in the back of his closet that looked like it'd fit him and paired it with some well-loved grey shorts, then eyed himself in the mirror critically.

*Is this acceptable?* He asked himself. *Probably not but since when do I give a fuck?* It was with this same attitude that he decided not to blow-dry his hair as he usually did. It was as hot as the devil's balls outside so his hair would have curled up in the heat anyway.

Mike then spent the morning setting up tables in the backyard, putting up decorations there and in the front, and using his minimal upper body strength to pull the barbecue out from under the awning in front of the garage and into the back for grilling later. He thought he'd be free afterwards, but during lunch his mother upset his plans to do absolutely nothing by giving him a shopping list and sending him downtown.

He knew she obviously meant for him to go the little farmer's market since all the stores were closed, but he wished they were open because going to the farmer's market just meant spending more time outside with no shade. He'd forgotten sunscreen, so at this rate, Mike was going to have to be slathered in aloe vera before the party even started. On his way back to the station wagon with his purchases, he tripped on seemingly nothing and would've fallen if it hadn't been for the streetlight in front of him. He hoped no one had seen it, but alas his prayers were not to be answered as he heard a familiar laugh from behind him.

"You okay there, Wheeler? What are you *wearing?*"

Max's coppery hair glinted in the bright light as she skated down the sidewalk and stopped, kicking up her board by the curb where the car was parked.

Mike groaned. "Not you..."

"Not happy to see me?" She grinned.

"Am I ever?"

Max reached over and jokingly punched him in the arm, but he saw her sunny smile falter and instantly felt bad. They weren't very close of friends, but Mike didn't dislike her. He just didn't know her that well.

"Just kidding, Mayfield," he said, offering her a small smile that returned hers to her face. "Where you headed?"

She fidgeted a little, suddenly looking away. "I didn't know how early I could come over to your place so I was just gonna hang around for a while. I don't really want to be at home right now and I didn't want to bother anyone."

Mike thought he might understand a little. There were a lot of days where he didn't want to be at home either. "Well, get in. I'm sure my mom would appreciate having you around."

Max hesitated. "You sure? I really don't want to be a bother-"

"You're not bothering anyone, just come on!" He put his bags in the trunk and got into the front, putting on his seatbelt before pulling away from the sidewalk and back to his house. They didn't really talk much on the way over, but luckily it was a short drive.

"You can leave your board on the grass if you want," Mike said, reaching into the trunk to get his bags of food.

Max nodded and dropped it on the lawn, following Mike up to the door.

"I'm back!" He called. "Max is here," he added, walking into the kitchen.

Karen smiled warmly at the girl. "Hello, Max, it's nice to meet you!"

Max held out a hand to shake. "Nice to meet you too, Mrs. Wheeler."

"I hope you're ready to enjoy the party!"

Mike could tell that Max felt really awkward trying to talk to his mom, so he decided he'd cut in to save her from having to continue. "Mom, I got all the stuff you asked for."

His mom turned to him, still smiling brightly. "Great!" She exclaimed, taking the bags from him and setting them on the island. "Thank you, Michael."

"Cool, so, um, I think I'm gonna go set up the sprinkler and the balloons for the kids. Max, do you wanna come help?"

Max threw him a relieved look. "Sure!"

The two made their way back outside, Mike heading to the hose with the bag of water balloons he'd snagged from the dinner table on the way out. "Can you bring that bucket over here?"

Max set the bucket down underneath the tap and took a handful of balloons out of the bag to start filling them up. After a few minutes of silence, she spoke.

"So you and El are really serious, huh?"

He looked up at her through the hair in front of his eyes. "I guess?" He felt like this was going to be a pivotal moment and he didn't know why.

Max frowned. "You *guess*?"

"I mean- we haven't exactly talked about the 'seriousness' of our relationship," Mike answered, holding up his fingers to imitate quotation. "But I'm pretty sure we've been dating only each other for like, three months now," he added, bending to stick another balloon under the tap.

"I see."

"Is this the 'don't hurt my best friend or I'll castrate you' talk?"

"Maybe."

"A little late, don't you think?"

"Better late than never."

Mike smiled, trying not to let Max see it. He didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing that she was being funny. Not to be mean, he just felt like that was going to be the type of friendship that developed between them.

"Do you love her?"

The question threw him off-guard. He hadn't told anyone else yet, much less Max. But maybe- "A little bit," he hedged, grinning so Max would know he was joking.

"A little bit," she deadpanned. "How romantic."

"Okay, maybe a lot," Mike answered defensively, dropping another filled balloon into the bucket. "I'm completely, like- in love with her, I just haven't told her yet because I'm a fucking wastoid."

Max let out an exasperated sigh. "I swear to god, you both are so dense. I'm not religious at all but Lord Jesus give me strength," she pled, looking to the sky. Her eyes cut back down to Mike sharply, forcing him to hold her gaze. "You have to tell her, *soon*. I'm tired of trying to convince her you're in love with her."

"Wh- no one- *convince*-" he spluttered.

Max rolled her eyes. "Just tell her, dude. It's not like she doesn't love you back."

Mike thought that a friendship with Max Mayfield might just be a worthwhile investment.

---

The rest of his friends arrived in the next two hours, and then all of them were just waiting on El to be complete. Nancy was hovering on the edges too, helping her mother with guests and the like while also keeping an eye out. She'd been badgering Mike about meeting his girlfriend since she'd gotten back home a few days before.

Said boy was trying to find an excuse to abscond from his torturous conversation with Mrs. Hotchkiss from down the block when he saw El step into his peripheral vision.

"Uh, sorry to interrupt this lovely chat, Mrs. Hotchkiss," Mike said sweetly, buttering up the old lady, "But I just saw one of my guests arrive and I should go greet her. Have a good evening!"

"But Mich-"

"Sorry!"

He was almost out of breath from running so fast across the lawn in his escape but he stopped in front of El still able to speak, so Mike counted it as a small victory. "Hey!"

"Hey," she answered, eyes sparkling.

He swallowed, taking in her outfit. "You look amazing."

"Why, thank you, Gigantor," El giggled. "You don't look so bad yourself."

She was wearing a plain dark blue t-shirt tucked into a belted, high-waisted pair of striped light blue pants. The entire thing was probably the most figure-flattering outfit Mike had ever seen her wear, and he couldn't deny that she really was absolutely radiant. Not that he would ever want to.

"Blue, huh?"

El nodded, smiling. "I liked how the pants look on me, and I wanted to branch out and wear a little more colour."

He smiled back and took her hand. "Well, they do look great. Come on, my sister wants to meet you," he added, scouting the yard for Nancy and finding her standing behind their dad holding a platter half-filled with hot dogs and burger patties.

The pair made their way over to her, weaving through the guests scattered on the lawn before stopping behind her. Mike poked her in the shoulder and she turned around, an irritated sigh leaving her

mouth.

"What do you want, Mike?"

Mike gestured to El with his free hand. "Nancy, this is El, my girlfriend."

El smiled and gave an awkward little wave before sticking out a hand to shake, which Nancy took enthusiastically with her one available hand.

"I've heard so much about you!" The girls exclaimed at the same time before breaking into giggles and turning to Mike with identical expressions of mirth. He felt his face heat up a little.

"Yeah, yeah, I talk about you to each other..." He mumbled embarrassedly, toeing the ground with a sneaker. "I'm gonna go find everyone else, come find us later, El."

El didn't look upset at being left with Nancy. In fact, she looked happy to finally be meeting his older sister, so Mike didn't worry about her as he walked away. He found the guys and Max chilling in the front. Will was sitting in the shade of the large tree in the yard, casually sipping a can of Coke, and Max was next to him tying weeds together in an attempt to make what looked like a very weedy flower crown while Lucas blew on blades of grass to make a loud whistle. Dustin was trying to cartwheel across the lawn.

"Hey guys, El's here!" Mike called as he approached.

"We know," answered Will.

"We saw her," continued Max.

"She's talking to Nancy now," Mike added, dropping down in the shade next to Will.

"Cool," Max said. She was sticking her tongue out a little as she held her loop of weeds close to her eyes, trying to get this one tricky stem to stay knotted with another. A moment later, she seemed to sense Mike watching her, and looked up at him with an expression that was probably trying to convey that she hadn't forgotten their little

conversation earlier. It made him shiver.

Eventually, El found her way back to them, but then they had to move to make room for Holly and the other little kids on the block to have their water fight, so the teens decided to go inside. At least the inside of the house wasn't as hot as hell.

"Hey," started Dustin once they'd all gotten settled in the basement. "We should play Never Have I Ever."

Lucas eyed him skeptically. "Isn't that a drinking game?"

Dustin scoffed. "It doesn't have to be! In this case, just put your finger down if you've done something and first one to none loses."

Max hummed in assent from her spot near the stairs. "Sounds better than sitting here dying of boredom."

Will nodded thoughtfully. "Why not? You guys in?" He asked, looking to the couple seated on the couch.

Mike glanced at El quickly before they shrugged in unison. "Sure."

"Great!" Dustin clapped his hands. "I'll start. Never have I ever accidentally eaten a bug." He looked around the circle of unimpressed faces before landing on Mike, who hadn't put a finger down. He knew Dustin had picked this on purpose to make him lose a finger, but he wasn't having it.

"It wasn't accidental, Dustin," Mike explained. "I told you I ate it knowing what it was, and I liked it!"

"Wait, you ate a bug?" Exclaimed El in disgust. "I've been kissing someone who eats bugs?!"

Mike shook his head in exasperation. "I was like, seven, and I tried a cricket. It was like, fried, or something. It was crunchy."

"Ew."

He shoved El's shoulder playfully. "You wouldn't stop kissing me even if I did eat bugs, admit it."



The rest of their friends groaned and Mike laughed. He quite enjoyed making them feel awkward.

"That's it, I'm next," stated Lucas. "Never have I ever kissed Mike or El."

The two in question glowered at him, each putting a finger down. In retaliation, Mike smirked as he said, "Never have I ever had a crush on Max." It was a double whammy because both Dustin and Lucas had to put a finger down. Will looked like he was trying not to laugh and Max looked like someone had dropped a bomb in front of her and told her to disarm it.

"You guys had crushes on me?" She asked incredulously, looking back and forth between the two.

Lucas sighed and looked at the ceiling. "I did, in like eighth grade. I thought you were really pretty and cool. I don't feel that way anymore, though, and I like being friends."

Dustin hadn't said a word and Mike kind of felt a little bad but he also kind of didn't. Max liked Dustin back, so he didn't really see the problem. They'd probably end up confessing by the end of the night and the rest of the group's plan would have accomplished its mission.

Dustin glanced at Max for a second before focusing on his feet. "That was a low blow, Mike."

"Don't come for me and I won't come for you," he retorted.

El broke the awkwardness by clapping her hands to bring everyone's attention to her. "Never have I ever... licked a frozen pole!"

Will smiled and shook his head as he put his first finger down. "Never have I ever liked a girl."

The basement fell silent for a second before three groans filled the air. "Fuck you, Byers!" Mike, Dustin, and Lucas were all down two fingers. Max was the only one who still had ten.

El eyed Will a little suspiciously. "You've never liked a girl?"

He shook his head, hair flopping. "Never."

By his side, Max grinned. "Never have I ever *not* been an only child," she said, smiling because she knew three of them would lose fingers for having siblings.

The game continued, filling the Wheelers' basement with groans and stifled laughs, until a damp Holly opened the door and told them it was time to come outside for food.

Once out there, the group stuck to themselves, not really feeling like socializing with the entire neighbourhood. Dustin accidentally squirted mustard all over Max's shirt when he was trying to douse his hot dog in it, looking horribly embarrassed, but Max didn't seem too bothered. In fact, Mike thought she looked like she was getting ready to tackle the other boy and make out with him or something, but then she thought better of it.

El nudged him in the side and he leaned down to hear her better. "Did you see the way she looked at him?"

"I know!"

"It's so happening tonight, I'm calling it right now."

El was right. As they all lay together on the front lawn watching the town council's fireworks go off in the square before setting off their own (Maple Street wasn't far from the town centre, and anyhow fireworks travelled high), Mike looked behind him and saw the two in question sharing a sweet kiss. He squeezed El's hand to get her attention.

"Don't look now, but they're kissing," he muttered.

She grinned. "I *called* it."

Her words reminded him of the way their friendship had begun: she leaving him her number and he calling her the same day.

"Mm, but I called you," he said quietly, his free hand reaching up to cup the side of her face and pull it closer.

El's grin devolved into a softer smile. "You did," she answered, leaning in, and then they were kissing too and it was wonderful. It wasn't fireworks, but then the fireworks exploding above them were miles away from how they felt.

---

After El left with Hopper and the rest of his friends had gone home as well, Mike was sitting by the front door staring up at the sky. He almost jumped when a hand landed on his shoulder and Nancy lowered herself down next to him.

"You have a good day?" She asked.

He nodded, his hands swinging a little from where his arms sat resting on his knees. "Yeah. You?"

"Really good. I like her."

Mike smiled. "She likes you too."

Nancy leaned her head on his shoulder. He'd been taller than her since he was thirteen, but it still wasn't something she did very often. "I'm glad you have her. She's a keeper."

"Yeah, she is."

"You know I love you, right?"

Mike rolled his eyes and didn't answer.

Nancy sighed. "I just feel like I don't say it enough. I want you to remember that."

"I do, Nance. I love you too." He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer.

---

how'd ya like that?

QOTD: what was your favourite part of this chapter?

AOTD: mine was writing max/mike interaction, it was really fun to

put those two characters together :D

## 16. The Finale

so as i was writing this i decided that the chapter i had planned after this was just gonna be irrelevant bc i changed some things plotwise so it ended up being useless. hope nobody minds and you guys still enjoy this last chapter! sorry again for the long wait, i'm on vacation now so i've been spending more time with my family :)

---

It was impossibly hot in the station wagon, partially due to it being August, but also partially because El Hopper was so ridiculously in love that it was almost impossible to keep her hands off of her boyfriend. She'd started it but now she was the one leaning back, letting his mouth trace its usual path down her neck. It kind of tickled, but she also really liked it. It was something fairly new and it made her feel like she was going to combust at any second.

"Mike," she said breathily, trying to find purchase in his hair so she could drag his face back up to hers, "Come back."

El felt his smile against her skin and the heat rising in her because of it. "I think I'll stay here," he responded cheekily, nipping at her throat before suckling on the bit where her neck met her collarbone.

"You're like a fucking vampire," she groaned, but she tilted her head back against the front seat anyway. She was certain in that moment that she would never be able to get enough of him. "I swear to god, if you leave me a hickey I will murder you."

He stopped. "Will you?" He murmured, nosing his way up to lightly bite her earlobe. "I don't think you will," he added, before grinning and leaning in to capture her lips.

And *God*, was it ever something. His hands burned her where he'd put them when her shirt rode up, gripping her hips like she was going to disappear if he didn't, and his lips were soft but insistent; just the combination of things to make El feel like she was going to burst out of her skin. *IlovehimIlovehimIlovehim-*

Eventually, she had to pull back when her mouth started to feel like

rubber. Her lips were probably so puffed up she looked like a toad, but Mike didn't appear to want her any less because of it. In fact, he ran a hand through her mussed up hair and tugged her face back closer to his as if he was going to kiss her again, but then just nuzzled into her cheek.

"I literally can't believe how beautiful you are," he whispered, eyes glittering.

"My heart feels like it's trying to run away," she giggled.

Mike brought her hand up to his chest, where she could feel his heartbeat going just as fast as hers. "It's always like that when I'm with you."

"Always?"

He chuckled. "Well, I have a flair for exaggeration, but. Mostly."

El lay her head over it, resting against him. "You wanna go out Thursday night? Ally asked if she could take my shift and I don't think you're working..."

He smiled and pressed another kiss to the top of her head. "Benny's and the meadow after?"

"You know it."

El went to bed that night almost sighing with the overwhelming joy she felt constantly these days. Loving Mike was the easiest thing in the world, now all she had to do was tell him that she did!

A feat that was proving harder than it should have. Oops.

She fell asleep imagining that she'd tell him Thursday night at the meadow. It was a place they'd discovered on a walk through the woods and really it wasn't even a meadow, just a small area with no trees where tons of flowers sprung up. It was peaceful and the two of them had never encountered anyone else there, although they were sure the spot wasn't exclusive. She'd be lying with her head on his lap while he played with her hair and she would just look up at him and say it.

*I'm in love with you.*

Yes. That was how she'd do it.

But, as her luck would have it, she got a call Wednesday night while she was hanging out with Max in her room. Max was in the middle of explaining something Dustin had said to her when the phone rang.

El rolled her eyes and started getting up. "I'll just be a minute."

"Not if it's loverboy you won't!" The redhead laughed as El ran out of the room.

"Hello?" She answered.

A sigh came over the line. "Hey, El." Mike sounded disappointed.

Her eyes dropped and so did her spirits. "What's up?"

"I have to cancel. I'm sorry."

"Ugh, that *sucks*! What happened?"

He sighed again. "My parents are going out for the night and won't be back until Friday night, so they're making me watch Holly."

El brightened again. "That's fine! I'll just come over and hang out, too!"

"You're okay with that?" Mike asked dubiously.

She rolled her eyes, knowing he couldn't see her. "Of course I am, Holly's a sweetheart."

"Okay, well, I guess I'll see you then, then?"

Max looked askance at her when she sat back down on her bed. "Who was it?"

El snuggled into her friend's lap. "Mike, but everything's fine. Let's get back to *your* story."

The redhead only shrugged as if to say *if you say so*, but she smiled

and launched back in.

---

Thursday afternoon came quickly, although El was a little disheartened that it seemed her plan was to go to waste. She dropped her bike on the grass by the Wheelers' basement door and entered the house calling a hello. No one was in the basement, but she heard a gasp and the patter of small footsteps before the door upstairs was thrown open, stopping her at the foot of the staircase.

"El!" Holly nearly flew down in her excitement, wrapping her arms around El's midsection tightly.

El laughed lightly. "Hi, Holly," she greeted, ruffling the little girl's hair.

Holly pulled away and ran back up, taking El by the hand to drag her along. "Mike's taking a shower but he'll be back soon," she explained, quickly and astutely noticing the older girl's eyes roving around the main floor in search of her boyfriend.

Holly had stopped at the bottom of the stairs leading to the second floor, looking contemplative, so El leaned down to her height to meet her gaze. "What do you wanna do while we wait?"

The small blonde narrowed her eyes and grinned. "We should go scare him."

El wanted to laugh at the devious expression on her face, but decided it would probably be best not to encourage her. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Holly only looked at her as if gauging whether El would be a worthy accomplice. "It'll be funny, but we have to be *very* quiet. He can hear good."

El put on a very serious expression and nodded solemnly, holding a finger to her lips. Holly smiled brightly and started creeping up the staircase, the sound of her feet hidden by the carpet. El followed suit, trying not to break out giggling at the images she was conjuring of Mike's reaction to their stealth mission.



None of them compared to his actual reaction, though: Holly and El were standing on either side of the bathroom door when he opened it so he didn't initially see them, but they jumped out and yelled "BOO" so loudly that he fell backwards onto the floor, nearly dropping the towel wrapped around his waist and letting out an inhuman screech followed by a loud proclamation of, "Oh my god!"

He sat on the floor of the bathroom with his arms crossed and glaring at them as they laughed until they couldn't breathe, and every time El looked back at him she laughed harder.

"You two think you're so funny," he said dryly.

Holly spoke between shrieks. "You- you- you f- fell- you *fell!*"

The little girl's mirthful expression quickly turned to one of panic as her face kept getting redder and her breaths shorter and wheezier. "Mikey-" she gasped, a hand rising to her chest, and El remembered something as Mike got up and raced past her down the hall to Holly's room.

*("Mommy said I could come with you if I want. Please, please, **please?**"*

*"Do you have your inhaler?"*

*Inhaler.* Jesus Christ, a kid was having an asthma attack right in front of her and she had no idea what to do. El backed away, figuring that giving Holly space would probably be best, and Mike came barrelling back with a piece of plastic in his hand. He shoved it into his sister's mouth and pressed down on the button at the bottom, spraying medicine down her throat. She clutched the inhaler and gasped and heaved a few more wheezy breaths before she started evening out.

Mike knelt in front of Holly, keeping a hand on the back of her head as her face drained of colour. "Are you okay?"

Holly nodded, so El took it as an okay to move back into the space and placed a hand on Mike's bare shoulder. He covered it with his free hand, squeezing lightly as they both looked at Holly for any signs of distress, but she seemed to be just about back to normal, if a little scared. She took the inhaler out of her mouth and Mike moved

back, standing and letting El's hand drop off his shoulder.

"Water," said Holly.

"Yeah, why don't you go down with El? I'm just gonna get dressed and I'll be right there, okay?"

Mike made his way into his room as the two girls walked back down the stairs they had so stealthily crept up a few minutes prior in a very different kind of silence.

"Are you sure you're okay?" El made a point of asking, because although Holly seemed to be fine now and still had her inhaler in tow, El thought she might panic if something happened again. She didn't have any experience with kids and it had scared her to see Holly in the state she'd been in without knowing how to help her.

"Yes, just thirsty," Holly responded quietly, entering the kitchen and going straight for the pitcher of water in the fridge. El got a glass down from the cupboard for her and watched silently as the little girl drank.

Holly was leaving the kitchen as Mike came in, dressed now in yet another striped t-shirt and a pair of corduroys. "Hey, I didn't really greet you before," he said, coming over to El and tilting her chin up to give her a quick and chaste kiss.

"It's okay."

His eyes followed Holly into the living room as she sat down and flipped channels on the TV. "God, I hate when that happens to her, but we can't really stop her from laughing, right?"

El shrugged and lay her head against his shoulder. "Not really. I guess you just have to help her."

Mike sighed and glanced back at his girlfriend, taking in her outfit. "Aren't you hot in that?"

El looked down at herself. "I always wear these, what do you mean?"

He scoffed. "Shirt, overall skirt, *and* leggings? All in black? You need

some colour, my love."

Her heart fluttered at his calling her 'my love', but she narrowed her eyes playfully. "So what do you propose to correct this problem you apparently see?"

Mike smirked a little bit, moving away from her in the direction of the living room. "What do you say we have a makeover, Hol?" He called. "It looks like we need an intervention."

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It ended up being that an hour and a half later, El was in one of Nancy's old dresses that she'd left behind (a white one with blue stripes and plain white buttons), and Mike had been covered in makeup twice over. First Holly had messed his whole face up putting whatever she liked on him, and then she'd insisted that he go wash it off so that El could do it for him properly. Since neither of them felt like saying no, he went and washed his face and then El did his makeup. She did it the way she usually did hers, lip gloss with eyeshadow rubbed into it, dark eyeliner and smudged black eyeshadow with a little bit of mascara.

"You don't even really need it," she'd told him as she attempted not to poke his eye, "your lashes are so long it should be illegal. Isn't it unfair that boys always have long and pretty eyelashes, Holly?"

Holly had vehemently agreed. The final effect was that Mike could've looked like your regular punk city kid, if only he wore all black and changed his hair up. El kind of liked how he looked, a half-cooked punk, but she knew he would never be the type. It was just as well because she preferred him in his nerdy stripes and corduroys anyhow.

"Ladies, ladies," he crowed after having seen his face in the mirror, "now that I look like a pirate it's time for a movie!"

Holly cheered. "Can we watch The Goonies? It has pirates!"

Mike gave his sister a piggy back ride back downstairs and El followed with a smile. She was imagining a day where she and Mike were older and Holly was a little girl with dark hair, golden eyes, and

a toothy grin. She half-hoped it would be true someday.

She also almost fell asleep watching the movie, sitting in the V created by Mike's legs and wrapped in his arms with Holly enjoying herself beside them, but Mike kept her just barely awake with the lazy kisses he was pressing to the side of her neck. El supposed that he was within his right; if he'd been sitting against her the way she was against him she surely would have done the same thing.

After the movie, Mike had washed his face and gotten to making some mac n' cheese and chicken for dinner, leaving Holly and El watching cartoons. Following a few minutes of Jem and the Holograms, El was just about done and decided to join Mike in the kitchen. Holly didn't really care, enraptured as she was by the pink-haired songstress on TV.

"You need any help?" El asked, waltzing into the room and turning on the radio.

Mike was putting a casserole dish with seasoned chicken breasts in it in the oven. "Not really, I can cook macaroni pretty fine, El," he answered after a beat, turning to grab the pasta pot. "But if you wanna stay I won't object."

She did, hoisting herself up onto the counter and swinging her legs. She was enjoying the way the skirt fluttered around her legs. In fact, she kind of liked dresses, she just didn't own many and preferred pants.

Mike started to sing along with the song playing, which surprised El a bit since she didn't know he liked-

"Pink Floyd?" She asked. "You like them?"

He hummed in assent. "I've never seen them, but I wish I could've when they came to Indianapolis last November. My parents don't like their 'look'. My mom hates it whenever she hears me listening to them, so I mostly do on my Walkman now."

El frowned. "That sucks, I think you would've loved it. They were amazing."

"You went?"

"I told you I listen to things other than Ramones and Sex Pistols."

Mike smiled as he poured the pasta into the water-filled pot. "You did," he acknowledged, putting the pot on the stove. Just looking at his smile was making El feel a little lightheaded, and she thought that maybe they didn't need to be on a special date night for her to tell him that she loved him. It wasn't like she only loved him on date nights, in fact she was feeling very in love right at that moment. But it wasn't the right time.

"Sorry I had to cancel our date to babysit," Mike said, interrupting her thoughts on that very subject. "It kinda sucks."

"Nah." El waved her hand. "Any time with you is time well spent, and who says this doesn't count as a date anyway?"

He snorted. "I guess you're right, but in light of the fact that my parents went out tonight to 'reconnect', everything seems a little weak."

El cocked her head. "I'm not sure I get what you mean."

Mike looked into the murky water as he stirred the macaroni, then grabbed a bottle of olive oil out of a cupboard above his head to drizzle in. "Can you pass the salt, it's right behind you."

She passed him the salt and waited for an answer as he dropped some into the pot. He sighed. "I don't know, nothing makes sense in this house anymore. I'm sick of them trying to act like everything's normal when it isn't."

"Maybe it's a last attempt at fixing things?" She offered.

He shook his head sadly. "Maybe."

The only sound either of them heard for the next few minutes was cartoon chatter from the show Holly was watching and the radio softly in the background, Mike continuously stirring the pasta and El swinging her legs aimlessly.

"What do you think love is, El?"

El was startled by the sudden question. She looked at Mike to find him looking intently at her, still stirring the macaroni but waiting for an answer. She balled her hands into fists and relaxed them on the counter beside her before folding them into the sides of the dress.

"I'm not sure how to describe it," she said, gripping the fabric tightly. "It's like... liking someone so much that you never, *ever*, want them to leave, and you're kinda sad when they do. But all you want is to see them happy, and you would do anything for them to stay that way. It's when you're with someone and you can see yourselves together ten, or twenty, or even more years down the road. True love is forever, but I don't know how many people are lucky enough to find it."

Their eyes were fixed on each other as she spoke, and El wouldn't have been surprised if there was a neon sign above her head flashing *THAT'S HOW I FEEL ABOUT YOU!*

Mike turned back to the pot and didn't respond for a second. "That makes sense," he finally said. "I don't think my parents have ever been in love."

El swallowed around the lump in her throat and screwed up her courage. "Have you?"

Mike looked back at her, dark eyes boring into hers. She felt like he was peering into her soul and seeing exactly what she meant by that question.

"I have." He didn't take his eyes off of her. "What about you?"

"Yeah," she answered quietly.

He nodded and turned back to the pot, taking a macaroni out to bite it. "It's ready."

El hopped off the counter as Mike bent to check the chicken. "Dinner will be served in about ten minutes, shortstack."

At that she slapped his arm. "Michael!"

He laughed as he stood back up, reaching out to pull her close and plant a kiss on her, his big, expressive eyes shining.

El stepped back and picked up the sides of the dress. "I'm going to change back into my clothes, don't wanna get Nancy's dress dirty."

Ten minutes later, El was changed, the table was set, and the three of them were sitting down to have dinner. El basked in the blissful domesticity of it all, smiling at Mike across the table and asking Holly questions, all the while imagining an evening in the future when the kid she and Mike were talking to was one of their own. It was nice.

El and Mike picked up and cleared the table, Holly heading back to the couch. She was asleep by the time they finished, so Mike carried her upstairs and changed her carefully into her pyjamas so as not to wake her up, El watching as he tucked the little girl in and kissed her forehead before smoothing back her hair and standing up to leave.

Mike shut the door to Holly's room and turned to face El with a wide grin. "Now that we're alone..." He edged down and across the hall to his own bedroom, making a running jump onto his bed. El stood in the doorway trying not to explode from *too* much happiness. *God, he's just so cute!*

"Come here," he whined, lifting his head and dropping it back down after a second. El thought he looked kind of pitiful all alone, so she figured she'd join him. She grabbed his hand and linked their fingers and the two of them stared at the ceiling for a moment before turning to each other at the same time. El started to laugh but Mike slid his head over and muffled the sound with his mouth before it could come out.

Her hands went up to cup his face but because of their sideways position it wasn't really working, so El pulled back. Mike frowned.

"What?"

El slid up along the bed and repositioned herself so that she was lying on his pillows as if she were about to go to sleep. "This way is better."

He grinned and crawled up to hover over her, just taking her in

before leaning down to capture her lips in a kiss again. This time, when her hands went up to his face, they stayed there; thumbs running along his cheekbones. Their mouths opened one after the other in what was now a practiced motion, tongues sliding against each other in the middle. It was always wet, but now that El was used to it she liked it. It was an interesting kind of intimacy, touching someone else's tongue with yours. Kind of weird. But also really hot. Like, *really* hot.

Mike had been right about her clothes making her too hot. She was the one who pulled away again with a gasp, opening her eyes to a beautiful sight: her boyfriend with flushed cheeks, slick lips, and wide, dark eyes.

"I'm too hot," she gasped. He moved off of her without a word, simply sitting back and letting her get up. El slid her leggings down and off her legs, immediately noticing the difference and becoming instantly more comfortable. She discarded them on the floor and lay back, pulling Mike down with her. She had, unknowingly, made a cradle with her legs, and that was where he ended up being, so El wrapped them around his waist and her arms around his neck to bring his face back to hers.

They had been at it for a few minutes more, the straps on her overalls undone, when she felt the hand that was on her knee start to creep up. Right after, Mike stopped kissing her (unfortunate) to look into her eyes.

"Is this okay?" He asked, squeezing a little. It sent a pleasurable little shiver up her spine.

El groaned, almost in annoyance. "Of course it is, you dork. Do whatever," she answered. "Just don't stop kissing me."

He smiled quickly before heeding her demand. Kissing Mike was probably just about the best thing ever invented, but combined with the sensation of his hot palm sliding up her thigh and squeezing softly every so often it was even better. Good lord, was she ever in love with him...

Things ramped down bit by bit until the two of them were lying side



by side again, sharing one pillow and staring at each other silently. The entire moment and everything about it was soft; the house, the room, the air, *them*. El wanted to stick her face in it like a cotton candy cloud, but she was already there herself. She felt warm and safe, and above all, *loved*.

"Mike?" He continued to look at her, his features conveying a *yes?* without words. "Can I tell you something?"

El could feel her heart going a million miles a minute, but she guessed that was part of the magic of love.

"You can tell me anything."

She smiled and watched as Mike's face mirrored hers. She leaned closer, as if she were about to tell him a secret, and rubbed her nose softly against his. "Remember how we were talking about being in love?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm in love with you."

The silence right after she said it was deafening, and El completely understood what people meant when they said that sometimes silence is the loudest sound of all.

Her heart was in her throat, but then Mike's smile widened. "Well, let me tell you something, Miss Hopper."

She nodded expectantly.

"I am in love with you right back."

El almost wanted to laugh. All that worrying she did for absolutely nothing! Max would surely say *I told you so!*

"God, I worried over telling you so much," she admitted.

"It's not an easy thing to say when you mean it."

She sighed, turning to face the ceiling. "Sometimes when I look at

you I feel like I'm going to explode because I love you so much."

Mike chuckled and she giggled. "I feel that just thinking about you. And to think this all started because you stabbed Troy Harrington with a screwdriver and I just happened to be in the office at the same time."

"Fate," said El simply. "I don't think I would've ever had the courage to talk to you, much less tell you I liked you, if we hadn't met and become friends."

"I, for one, still can't believe you had a crush on me."

El scoffed. "Why do you think I haven't let you near my yearbooks?"

"What, did you bookmark every page with a picture of me on it?" Mike asked sarcastically.

She didn't deign him with an answer, but she knew he could see her blushing.

He propped himself up on his elbow. "You *did!* Oh my god, this is gold."

"Can you stop making fun of the unfortunate beginnings of my feelings, please?" El retorted, turning back on her side to face him again.

"Never, my love! I will remind you until the end of time!"

Her heart fluttered again. "I really like when you call me that."

She smiled and he smiled back. "My love?"

"Yeah."

"I love you. A lot."

El kind of felt like her whole body was blushing. She never wanted it to let up. Which brought her to-

"Do you think we'll last?"

Mike frowned. "As in, our relationship?"

She nodded.

"Well, I can't see the future but I hope we do. I think I'll love you forever and beyond. If I ever tell you I don't love you anymore, take me to the priest for a confession because I'm lying," he answered seriously.

El laughed. "That's dramatic."

Mike threw his hands up. "Not joking!"

"Okay, okay, I'll take you to the priest," she consoled him. "But guess what?"

"What?"

She grinned. "I'm glad Harrington decided to be a bitch that day. Now I have the most beautiful person in my life, and you know what's even better?"

Mike shuffled closer, pressing his forehead against hers conspiratorially. "What?" He whispered.

"He loves me!"

The two of them smiled so hard El thought both of their jaws might break off.

"He does, El," said Mike, grinning, lips a hair's breadth away from hers. "He really does."

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alright so that's the end of it! it's been a wonderful 8 months working on this story and i will probably always hold it close to my heart. developing this mike&el has certainly been a journey that i feel has improved my writing. that said, i'd like to thank all of you for reading and reviewing! but an especially big thank you to the people who reviewed because it really made my day when i checked and saw a bunch of people saying things and having reactions to my writing :) all a writer ever wants is feedback,,,,,,,,, we're all thirsty for

comments,,,,,,,,,

hands up how many of you would be interested in a sequel? i'm kinda on the fence abt it rn and would be taking a break from multichapter for a bit, but tell me if you'd prefer a sequel to this or something new bc i've already got new ideas!

PS my tumblr is urdearestmom if you wanna hmu. send me prompts/requests or something. i'm gonna be doing oneshots for a while

PPS did anyone notice i never explained why el is called el in this fic? haha make up your own headcanon time!